

VALENTIN OVECHKIN

*Greetings
from the Front*

Translated from the Russian
by

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THE PASSENGER TRAIN was travelling West from Kiev, but the front was still a good way off. At the rate we were moving, cautiously creeping over makeshift bridges and rough-laid embankments, making long waits at semaphore points and giving the road to military supply trains almost at every siding, it would take another day or even two before we reached the front. The passengers could still see stretches of ploughed fields, tractor-drawn waggons loaded with seed trundling along the roads, and people harrowing or sowing with teams of cows. It was the month of May and the height of the sowing season on the collective farms.

The car was crowded with passengers, both military and civilians. People lay on the floor under the seats and on the luggage racks beneath the very roof. It was almost impossible to squeeze through the passages which were encumbered with bundles and suitcases. The girl porter took up a position on the car steps outside the locked door at every stop, resisting the attempts of new passengers to gain admission to the car and shouting:

"Full up! Try further down!"

"We don't mind standing, anywhere'll do."

"There isn't any room, I tell you! The regular passengers inside have been standing on one leg, like geese, all the way from Kiev. How long d'you think people can stand on one leg?"

"I say, let me in. I'm from this car. Just went out to buy something."

"From this car, you say?" The girl shot a suspicious look at a young Red Army soldier with a sparse reddish moustache that sprouted all over the place like cat's whiskers and was obviously a recent acquisition, and turned to the passengers seeking confirmation.

"Is he from this car?"

"Yes, he is! Tell by his moustache. He's been travelling all the way from Fastov."

Two or three women with sacks contrived to rush the platform of the car in the wake of the soldier. At every stop the car became more crowded.

What with the crush and the stuffiness, conversation in the car was conducted on a somewhat heightened note.

"Hey, there, young fella!" some one shouted from overhead to the soldier as he scrambled through to his place over passengers' backs and knees. "Sell me your mousetail, I'll use it instead of a bath sponge when I get to the front."

Somebody tugged the boot of a passenger berthed on the luggage rack.

"It's a darned shame I call it! Here's a fellow been sleeping three days, snoring his head off, while your legs are swollen with standing. I don't remember seeing him going once to the lavatory! Hi, friend, wake up! Here, let's change places. Get up, stretch your legs a bit."

Two soldiers, perched precariously on one shelf, could not fall asleep and kept jostling each other.

"What the hell are you twisting about for? Can't you lay quiet? Twisting and turning, you'd think he'd swallowed a bradawl. Whatsermatter—too hard? Want me to give you a feather bed?"

"The mess-tin keeps slipping down."

“Oh, the mess-tin! That was a brainwave of yours—shoving it under your head. To be sure, two empty pots won’t lie on top o’ one another. Here, hang it up, and roll your coat under your head.”

The only quiet railway conversation was conducted in the compartments where the passengers were more or less comfortably accommodated. The talk turned on the second front market prices in the Donbas and Dniepropetrovsk district, good and bad food bases, and mingled with it were the clicking of dominoes played on suitcase lids, laughter and snatches of song. From the far end of the car a gay voice chanted a popular ditty to the accompaniment of a balalaika.

Captain Spivak was returning to his unit at the front after having had his wound patched up. He had improvised a bed on the middle shelf with the aid of his tent-cape, great-coat, map-case and kit, and lay with his long legs resting on the railprop of the luggage rack, gazing for hours out of the window, or sleeping, or perusing for the tenth time an old newspaper he had bought in Kiev. The Captain had a headache from the tumult in the crowded car. It was the Captain’s third year of fighting, but ever since the outbreak of the war this was his first experience of railway travel in a passenger train. He had made the journey from the Ukraine on foot by a route that brought him via Perekop to the Crimea, thence to the Caucasus, from the Caucasus to the Volga, then back again to the Ukraine, fighting mostly in the steppes and forests, keeping clear of the big towns, which, if he did have to pass through them, were still burning, and where wrecked railway stations greeted him with the noise of rifle fire instead of engine whistles. He remembered the railways for what they were before the war—spick-and-span railway cars smelling of fresh paint, electric light in every compartment, closet conveniences at both ends of

the car, civil porters and a punctual timetable. He had even asked the porter by force of habit when boarding the train: "Is this a smoker?" to which she had gruffly replied with a look of astonishment: "Smoker! Fancy asking! All cars are smokers now.... Where are you travelling from, Captain? Not from the Far East?" Spivak, who had got used to a good deal at the front, was not accustomed to frontline railways simply because he had not had occasion to use them. He lay fretting because the train stood for hours amid the deserted steppe waiting for the semaphore to go up and because at stops where one could do some shopping, nobody could say how soon the train would be starting again, and just when you reached the vendors' stalls the departure whistle would blow; he lost his temper over the window which had probably not been opened for three years and couldn't be opened because it was stuck fast and the straps were missing anyway; he made a wry face as he felt the stubble on his chin, for there was nowhere to shave, there was no water in the closet, and you couldn't get to the little compartment table by the window.

In that compartment, under his berth, sat the young soldier with the reddish moustache; an old woman with a little girl of four on her knees, returning from evacuation to some place near the frontier; two elderly women, one of whom, judging by her talk about schools and pupils, was a school-teacher appointed by the educational authorities to some new post, the other a major's wife returning from a visit to her husband in hospital; an old man of seventy or so in an army greatcoat, and two invalids, one without an arm, the other a blind man on crutches, with a face disfigured by livid scars and burns. The invalids occupied the corner seats by the window, and held themselves aloof, discussing their own private affairs in quiet tones without joining the

general conversation. The man without the arm was, apparently, not yet accustomed to his disablement. His blind companion rolled cigarettes for him and opened tins of food with a Finnish knife which he manipulated more effectively by his sense of touch than his comrade did with his one hand. The latter, however, went out at stops for hot water and milk, read the newspaper to his blind companion and helped him around the car.

Only snatches of conversation reached Captain Spivak from below through the rumble of the wheels, and they did not arrest his attention.

Screening himself with a newspaper against the sun which shone straight into the window, and letting his eyes wander absently over the faces of his fellow-passengers, Spivak speculated how long he would still have to travel in that car, how many more miles he would have to cover by jeep and truck until he reached the front, and where he would find his army. He called to mind his wife and children whom he had managed to see at home after his discharge from the hospital, thought of the people he had met and the talks he had had in his native village in the Poltava region whence he was now travelling, and took out of his kit-bag some home-made cakes which he began idly munching, washing them down with tepid soured milk from his flask.

Many people went out of the car at some unforeseen stop and the compartment suddenly became deserted and quiet. The train was standing in a forest. Spivak too went out, sauntered down the track, descended to a stream that flowed under a viaduct, stripped himself to the waist, took a wash, and returning to his compartment refreshed and clear-headed, he gave a more attentive ear to the talk that was going on below. The train being at a standstill there was no noise of wheels or hubbub to prevent him following the conversation.

The school-teacher was speaking. The talk was about life before the war, the war itself, the losses and suffering caused by the war. The woman was talking about her own family.

"We were three married sisters, four brothers and father and mother. My brothers, younger sister and I lived with the old folks. We lived in the same house, but in different apartments. On holidays we always used to gather at my elder brother Dmitri's place for dinner. A company of eighteen used to sit down to the table. All our acquaintances envied us the way we lived—we were such a happy, loving family. Our father was a workingman, engine driver, yet he managed to give all his children a university education. Dmitri was director of a factory, two of the other boys were engineers and the girls were school-teachers. We lived nicely. While we were studying we used to help each other out—the elder ones helped the younger; then, when each started to make his own living we got along independently. What's left of our family now? One of my sisters, and all her children and husband, were killed in the very first days of the war at Kovel. Dmitri joined the partisans; we know nothing about his fate, and he left behind three children and a crippled wife—the Germans maimed her in the Gestapo. My father was killed on the railway during a bombing raid. We have no news about another brother—he last wrote us from Smolensk when the army was retreating and we haven't heard from him since. I haven't had any letters from my husband for more than six months. Varya, my younger sister, who was living with me, received a false notice about her husband's death. She lived for a year by herself, then married another man. And recently her husband turned up, an invalid without a leg—he got encircled during the fighting at Minsk in '41 and stayed on in the forest as a

partisan until he rejoined the Red Army. Lost his leg in the last battle. Now he's come back. Varya's already got a baby from her second husband, and two from the first one. When I left she had not yet made up her mind what to do, whom she was going to live with. There, you see how many wounds there are in one family...."

"I, Madam, had three sons," said the old man in the army greatcoat. The younger one's still fighting, but the other two are dead. The eldest got killed at Stalingrad, the other one died in hospital in our town, in my arms. I've got something to remember him by, this coat of his I'm wearing.... Just before the war, you know, I had intended retiring. The boys were grown up, and making a decent living. They told me: 'Dad! We don't want people to think ill of us, letting you work at your age. Retire on your pension, we'll buy you and Ma a little house with a garden outside town (we lived in Nezhin) and we'll help you all together—you'll get along all right. It isn't as if you need so much!' That's what I thought too—we old folk didn't need much. Well, it was just the spring of '41, and we started to look for a little cottage with a nice garden where we'd be able to spend our old age quietly and peacefully, make a holiday of it. And here I am now, no house, no sons.... It's all ended in smoke. And I'm left with three little grandchildren on my hands. A rest now is out of the question. One must live. Roll up your sleeves and put your shoulder to the wheel. If not for yourself, for the sake of the grandchildren. My own flesh and blood after all. Who'll set them up in the world? Don't expect them to go into a children's home when they have grandparents living! Our only hope now's the third boy—maybe Sasha'll come back. I'm getting on in years too, turned seventy-one. I'm a cutter, a tailor's cutter, by profession. The work's not hard and I can't complain about my health.

Never had anything more serious than mumps ever since I was a child, but I get attacks of weakness. Doesn't seem to be anything wrong with me, yet I feel shaky. I notice it about the house how feeble I've become lately. A bucket of coal, say, weighs something round a pood, but it seems to me now to weigh three. Then when it comes to walking a big distance I'm a washout. And I've got to hang on for at least another ten years to bring up the grandchildren. The eldest is getting on for eight. Now, it'll be some time before he grows to manhood! Yes, and as likely as not I'll bring back some more kiddies. . . . I'm going now in search of my daughter. We had a daughter, too, in Izyaslavl, a widow with two children. When the Germans took the town she disappeared without a trace. We keep on writing, but neither before nor now, when the place has been liberated, have we heard from her. What's happened to her, God knows. I'm going to make enquiries about her. Maybe they've left the town, or maybe they were killed—my daughter was a member of the Communist Party. Or maybe she's dead and the children are living in some children's home. . . . There, that's the way my life has turned out. I thought—you've lived and worked and brought up the children, now you can die in peace. But things work out so you've got to go on living. I've already given up smoking. Smoked a pipe for over forty years—chucked it now. Not for economy's sake—just on account of my health. Even started doing physical jerks—on Müller's system. Do it on the sly, though, so's not to let the old woman catch me at it. She'd probably think—'look at the old fogey, wants to get young.' There's nothing for it but to pull your strength together some way or another to make life last a bit longer. Mechnikov, the famous scientist, they say, prolonged his life with sour milk; he used to drink a glass of sour milk first thing in the morning—to destroy some sort

of harmful microbes in the stomach which are supposed to cause premature ageing. But we haven't got a cow and soured milk's expensive on the market, so I thought perhaps a cold dousing would improve the circulation.... I'm not saying anything against the microbes, maybe it's right about them affecting the organism, but if you ask me, old age is the result of stagnation of the blood. Now why is it that when a man drinks vodka—in moderate quantities, of course, not so as to make him tipsy—it braces him up for a time and even sort of makes him stronger: he can walk uphill without losing his breath and carry a weight he would never be able to lift onto his back when he's in a sober state? Because his blood circulates faster under pressure of alcoholic vapours. Now, physical exercises, I've noticed, also have a good effect in whipping up the blood."

Nobody in the compartment laughed at the venerable sportsman, and he himself spoke about his innocent researches in the field of human longevity with utter gravity and without the shadow of a smile.

"You've got to live, Dad, not only for the sake of your grandchildren," said the major's wife. "Don't you think it's interesting to live to see how everything that our sons sacrificed their lives for is restored?"

"It's interesting, of course," agreed the old man. "It's nothing new to us, we know what life was before the war; still it wouldn't be bad to see it again.... But it strikes me, Madam, that the Dnieper Power Plant will be rebuilt sooner than my little granddaughter Katya will forget the bombings. She still cries out in her sleep: 'Mamma, they're coming! Mamma, they're coming!'"

Spivak lay listening and made a mental note of the fact that with the end of the war in sight people seemed to be increasingly engrossed in thoughts of their private fates, of

ruined homes, of the heavy burden the nation would have to bear in rebuilding its life from the debris of yesterday's scenes of battle, and of the repairable and irreparable effects of the war. A good deal similar to this railway talk he had heard at home, in his village, from people whom he knew.

"What wouldn't people give for a quiet, peaceful life!" said the major's wife with a heavy sigh. "It's not just a matter of wishing the war over, it's the old times we want to see back again."

"They won't be the same any more," answered the school-teacher.

"Why not?"

"They won't be exactly the same. You and I are not the same we were. I, for example, have a feeling that I'll never be as happy and carefree as I remember I used to be before the war."

"I mean the simple things. I'd like to see the markets teeming again with produce coming up daily from the country, the twenty different kinds of loaves and buns in the bakeries, the shop assistants in starched aprons, the ice cream vendors at every street corner selling portions at twenty kopeks, the militia men in white gloves, the lit-up houses."

"That'll come back...."

Taking advantage of the stop the two invalids were having their meal in the corner by the little table, talking in undertones about front life, about a Lieutenant Kudrya who had lost his taste for meat after having received shell-shock while sitting in a dugout eating American canned sausage fried on lard; about the fighting at Kanev, a river crossing, of things and documents lost and mislaid.

"Where are you boys bound for?" the old man in the

greatcoat asked them. "By the look of you your fighting days are over, yet you're travelling West."

"We've been visiting his place," the one-armed young man said motioning to his blind comrade, "in Darnitsa, not far from Kiev, and now we're heading for my village."

The one-armed man put the remains of the meal back into his kit-bag and swept the bread crumbs off the table with the sleeve of his shirt. The blind man rolled two cigarettes, for himself and his comrade.

"When we came to Darnitsa," began the one-armed man, "we went to the street he used to live in—he couldn't see anything, of course, but I could see there wasn't a whole house left standing on that street. He says to me: 'It's the third house from the corner.' But who could make out which was the third house, when there was no first nor second—just a pile of rubble. We walked round and round the spot until at last we ran into a man of his acquaintance. 'No, Petro,' he says, 'your family ain't here any more.' He had a mother and little sister there—they got killed during an air attack. The Germans bombed Darnitsa pretty hot—it was a juicy spot for them, a railway junction, a bridge nearby and a ferry—the place was all ploughed up, one crater on top o' another. Well, I says, if that's the case, Petro, you'd better come with me and live in my home. I had letters from my people when I was at the front, they were all right. I've got a mother, a widowed sister and a young brother. Come on, brother sergeant, let's go. . . . We'd served together in the same machine-gun outfit; he was crew leader and I second gunner. Fought together for two years. We hiked all the way from Ordjonikidze town to Kanév. He saved me from death, you might say. I'd have lost my head, leave alone my arm, in that last battle, if it wasn't for him. He carried me out when I got wounded—our machine gun was smashed by a tank shell. He had a splinter wound

in the leg himself, but he didn't leave me in the lurch—dragged me out on his back about three hundred metres to a ravine. Tied up my arm with a bandage out of his first-aid packet, stopped the bleeding, and then went back for the platoon commander and got himself mixed up in another tank assault. This was when he got properly damaged. He was scorched by a flame thrower and hit in the leg by another splinter. We lost track of each other for a time, then met again at the medical battalion. He recognized me first, by my voice. He was lying with his face all bandaged up, you couldn't very well recognize a fellow with his face muffled up like that. I'd lost my temper over something and started bawling out the nurse when he heard me and called out: 'Is that you, Sidorenko?' We were treated in the same hospital and discharged at the same time. Naturally, we've stuck together ever since. We were in a hospital all the way down by the Black Sea, in Sochi. On our way back we dropped in on his hometown first. Well, when a fellow's got such rotten luck as to lose his home and his family, it's only natural he should come to my home. My mother's a good woman. She'll welcome him like a son when she knows he didn't leave me in the lurch and saved my life in battle. We'll live like two brothers. We'll manage to get along all right. I've had a schooling—finished six classes; I'll learn to write with my left hand and get a job as clerk on a collective farm. We'll find something for him to do too. He was a motor repairs mechanic in civil life, a locksmith, a turner, a blacksmith, a Jack-of-all-trades—maybe he'll be able to fix up with a job as instructor. We haven't got any good specialists down at our place who understand machines, only a home-bred smithy who at best can bend an oven fork for the housewives or tinker with a ploughshare, but can't handle a big repair job, like patching up a harvester, and if he does put a new rim on a wheel

it doesn't hold longer than the first trip out to the field. If he don't get fixed up with something to do, it makes no difference, let him sit at home and look after the house. He'll get a pension, the collective farm'll help. After all, didn't a man lose his health fighting for his own Soviet people? Ours is a working family, mother's not an old woman, only forty-seven. I'll be earning a livelihood. We'll manage."

The train started moving with a sudden jerk. Once more the wheels began clicking on the rail joints, faster and faster, louder and louder. The conversation reached Spivak in an indistinct buzz. The other war invalid was talking now, his blind scarred face turned towards his comrade; the soldier with the reddish moustache said something; the old woman with the little girl on her knees put in a few words too, but the Captain caught only scraps of the conversation.

Spivak began to doze off again to the clicking of the wheels and the gentle swaying of the car. He rearranged the clothes under him more comfortably and composed himself for several hours' sleep.

Spivak was roused from his slumber towards evening by noise and laughter. The train was drawn up at a large station. The lower seats were occupied by new passengers. The old man in the greatcoat was gone, so were the two invalids and the school-teacher. The compartment was still more crowded, but with people of a different type—two young women, one in a white beret, the other in a knitted fluffy shawl, soldiers in frontier guard uniforms and railwaymen of the repair gang.

The conversation and general interest was monopolized by a new passenger—a tall, ruddy-faced man of about thirty in a grey suit, a grey soft hat and kid leather top-boots creased accordion-fashion at the ankles and with the tops turned down. This sociable passenger pounced eagerly on every scrap of conversational bait and betrayed a close familiarity

with market prices, makes of German bombing planes and feminine psychology, and was full of facetious stories for every occasion, relating anecdotes which raised a laugh in some quarters and provoked a frown in others.

Spivak had a hazy recollection of having, through a veil of drowsiness, seen this young man clambering into the car close on the heels of one of the young women, whom he steered ahead of him, lugging his suitcases unceremoniously right over the heads of passengers. The woman was evidently a chance travelling acquaintance. In the car he wrote down her name and address in his notebook, where she worked and when she was at home, gave her his own address and exchanged photographs with her.

In trying to get something out of a heavy suitcase lying on the luggage rack he manipulated it with one hand and nearly dropped it. Spivak noticed that his right hand was twisted at the wrist and that he could not use it properly. For some reason the Captain instantly decided that the injury was not due to a wound, but was incurred before the war; in all probability it was a natural deformity. During his trip home Spivak had met many ex-servicemen in the rear who had received their honourable discharge. He could identify them by some article of military uniform or insignia, a faded army shirt worn beneath a civilian jacket, a regulation cap, soldierly bearing, decorations or a guards regiment badge which many would not part with after being discharged from the army. None of these frontline tokens were visible about the new passenger.

Listening to the talk of the new company down below, Spivak had several times caught the expression dropped by the man in the soft hat: "Can't be helped—war you know," a stock-phrase he couldn't stand. He laid aside his newspaper with a scowl, turned over on his side facing the interior of the compartment and felt a strong inclination to break into

this car talk, the tone and tenour of which was entirely different to that of the previous company. Glaring down at the nape of the hatted passenger who was leaning over towards the women, Spivak said to himself: "If he says: 'Can't be helped—war, you know' three more times, I'll climb down."

The passenger was telling how the mothers in a certain farmstead somewhere in the Kiev district, in order to save their girls from being mobilized and packed off to Germany, coerced them into inviting to their homes the only male who was left in the place, a lad of seventeen years of age. The object was to obtain a medical certificate of pregnancy which exempted women from mobilization. That was two years ago. The passenger related the story with relish. Now, if you please, the whole farmstead was related, full of little brothers and sisters from the same father. And nobody seemed to mind it, there were no rows, no jealousy, seeing that it was done by mutual consent and agreement. They were all living peacefully. That lad, though, got packed off to Germany. He'd helped others but couldn't help himself.

The woman in the white beret, the one the chatty passenger had helped into the car, wanted to know what would happen if the lad came back home from Germany. How would everything be settled? He would marry one of the girls, say, but what about the rest?

"It'll be written off against the war," retorted the passenger with a chuckle. "There's no end of funny incidents these days. They'll come to terms, don't you worry. Jealousy's a bit out of place now when there's such a dearth of men. The girls have got to share and share alike what's left of the menfolk. War, you know!"

"One," Spivak scored off to himself.

The passenger, throwing playful glances at the women, examined at great length sundry versions of what he thought

would be an amicable solution of the problem. He turned very often to the woman in the beret who was listening with interest.

"Ah, how many poor little girls were carted off by the Germans!" sighed an old woman. "I've got a sister in Poltava—her two daughters were driven off to Germany, and a granddaughter too. Her other granddaughter got off by being bitten by a mad dog that belonged to a neighbour. A doctor of their acquaintance gave her an injection and wrote out a certificate that she had to take care against damp for a whole year and not eat anything sour or salty. . . . So they didn't take her because of that. We don't know what happened to the others, haven't heard anything from them. . . . Will our people rescue them when they get to Germany, I wonder? They say they're having a hot time there now, being bombed something awful! A regular Sodom and Gemorrah! Yes, it's lost they'll be, poor children, all alone in a strange country. And you'll be waiting all the time, expecting 'em to come back. . . ."

The train was standing at a wayside station whose wrecked buildings were surrounded by charred and withered poplars.

"Looks as if we're stuck again," somebody observed. "Funny, no train's overtaking us from behind and nothing's coming from the other direction."

"The station-master's assistant has sent his wife out to sell the milk," said the soldier with the reddish moustache. "She hasn't sold out yet. There's only one passenger train a day—if she doesn't sell it today it'll turn sour by tomorrow."

Everyone laughed. Spivak smiled too.

A long whistle sounded outside.

"Here we go!"

"Has she sold the milk?"

"Suppose so. Probably counting the cash. . . ."

"Seeing that we've started, it's not a bad idea to have a

smoke," said the passenger in the hat, pulling a cigarette case filled with makhorka out of his pocket and a little packet of newspaper folded to cigarette size.

"Can I have a bit of paper for a cigarette?" asked the soldier.

"What now!" complained the old woman. "Why didn't you go outside to smoke while the train was standing? No sooner does the train start than you must be smoking again. Must you smoke all together? It's stuffy enough as it is."

"Never mind, Ma. 'A makhorka killer's good for chest and liver'. Ever heard that one?" said the soldier. "It's something like a fumigator. We'll kill all the bosom chums and livestock in the car, if there are any."

The passenger in the hat was apparently a travelling supply agent for some factory or industrial trust. Judging from his stories, he had been touring many parts of the country lately, including the Donbas, Kharkov, Zaporozhye and Kiev regions, and had seen and heard a good deal. But he seemed to have seen things one-sidedly, from the side which interested him most, and that was hotels, railway stations and restaurants. Kharkov after the Germans, according to his description, appeared to be a city of private confectionary shops and beer halls. "You can get whatever you want, even pigeon's milk—but of course you've got to have the spondulics." Kiev was the cheapest place for vodka, you couldn't find a cheaper one throughout the Ukraine. In Voroshilovgrad he had been very smart in obtaining a ticket for the Moscow train when even army majors and colonels had been obliged to wait for the next opportunity; he had struck an acquaintance with a girl working on the railway; she had kept assuring him all the time of his striking resemblance to her husband who had been mobilized on railroad repair work at the front areas—he was always certain now of travelling soft when he'd be

in those parts. Besides the confectionary shops in Kharkov he liked the public baths there. "The baths there are great! When you walk into a private apartment it's real posh—two rooms, a cloak room, sofa; all that's missing is a table with a samovar on it. Family apartments too. They were prohibited before the war, but they've come in again. Go ahead, anybody who likes. It's my wife—and that's all there is to it. Don't even look at your papers."

"I wonder why they allow it now?" enquired his companion.

"I suppose it was allowed under the Germans and it's stayed like that since. War, you know! Can't be helped...."

"Two!" Spivak counted off with growing irritation and he must have done it audibly, because the fellow in the hat raised his head to look at him and asked:

"What did you say, Comrade Captain?"

"Nothing," replied Spivak. "Counting the miles. Carry on."

However, the Captain's intent gaze rather disconcerted the passenger and he effaced himself for a time. After relating an inoffensive trite railway anecdote, he fell silent, got a book out of his suitcase and settled down to read. Spivak, who had been preparing to rebuff the gentleman in good set terms was annoyed at his silence which thwarted his intentions.

The train stopped once more. From outside came the cries of vendors: "Poppy-seed patties! Boiled eggs! Sunflower seeds! Who wants sunflower seeds?" The soldier with the moustache, after many efforts, by aid of his Finnish knife, finally succeeded in prizing open the window. The passenger in the hat leaned out, called to a little girl of whom he bought sunflower seeds and regaled the women. All fell to with a good will, collecting the husks in handkerchiefs and palms. The host

himself sat reading his book and spitting the husks out onto the floor, aiming them, however, at a corner behind a suitcase. Somebody voiced a misgiving: "Won't the porter kick up a row over the mess? Maybe she'll call the chief conductor?" The gallant passenger waved a deprecating hand: "That's all right. The dirt's knee-deep as it is. They'll sweep it out. They don't fine you for this sort of thing in war-time."

"That makes it three," decided Spivak, and, leaning over his shelf, observed:

"It looks to me, Citizen, that you'll have a harder time of it when the war's over."

"Why?" said the other in surprise, raising his head.

"You won't have any use for that catchword of yours. You'll have the ground cut away from under you."

Gripping the edge of his shelf with both hands Spivak swung himself down. There was no room to sit. The women moved up closer to give him a seat, but the Captain sat down on the edge of the old woman's plywood suitcase placed end up in the aisle near the table.

"What do you mean by that expression of yours, young man: 'War, you know—can't be helped?' " commenced Spivak, tackling the passenger. "It's all we've been hearing. Like a blessed machine gun. I've been timing you—you said it three times in one hour. Estimating that you sleep eight hours when you don't do any talking, the other sixteen hours you'll be coming out with that nonsense forty-eight times a day. That means a thousand four hundred and forty times a month. It's simply ghastly to think how many times you've tossed off that wisecrack since the war began! Several million times, most likely."

The young man in the hat was visibly flabbergasted at the precipitated appearance, like a bolt from the blue, of this

bemedalled officer with close-cropped hair tinged with grey, and piercing angry eyes in a lean sallow face. The occupants of the adjoining compartments craned their necks round the partition on hearing this promising opening.

"What's it supposed to mean?" Spivak went on, pinning his eyes on the bridge of his interlocutor's nose. "War, you know—can't be helped! Why can't it be helped? Who can't help it? What's the idea—does it mean everything's up? My brother, machine gunner Ivan Spivak, could say 'can't be helped' when he ran out of ammunition and the infantry had not come up, and the Germans were crawling back to their trenches and swivelling round their machine gun at him. 'If we've got to do our bit,' he said, 'let's do it with a bang!' and he threw a pineapple at a box of German mines. But what does your expression refer to? Fishing in muddy water, eh? War! What do you know about war? Seeing there's a dearth of men, you've decided to put your hand to the wheel, catering to Kharkov, Voroshilovgrad, Dniepropetrovsk, Poltava?..."

There was a sound of laughter in the car. Thrown off his balance by the Captain's sudden onslaught, the passenger in the hat recovered sufficiently to throw in a few faltering words:

"You're wrong, Comrade Captain. I was at the front...."

"You were? Where? Doesn't look like it.... War's a big word, young man, and we won't have it labelled on every filthy thing. You were, you say? You don't sound like it. Spit, make a mess, dirty the place—war, you know! A good soldier'll never talk like that. That's the way a pillager would talk. Here," Spivak said, sweeping the newspaper off the shelf, "read this decision. Khrushchov signed it. Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Ukraine. There. You'd think he knew people's innermost thoughts

and longings. He's a frontliner. Defended Stalingrad. Read it. Hauled the Secretary of the Kiev Party Committee over the coals together with the Chairman of the City Soviet because several chestnut trees were cut down. That's the frontline way of doing things. Doing 'em with a vengeance. He's fed up himself with the sight of ruins and knows that people want things put into shape again. People want the clean things of life, light, greenery. You don't care for it. You're wallowing in dirt—you feel at home in it."

All other conversation in the car died down. A child began to cry in another compartment. Every one started shushing at it.

"War—you can do what you like! Who told you that?" continued Spivak. "Even in those hard days when we were retreating and the Germans had us pushed up against the Volga, anyone throwing out a slogan like that deserved to. . . ."

The Captain hesitated. "'Ave 'is bloomin' snout punched," a voice flung in from the other side of the partition occupied by a group of soldiers who were on their way to join their units after coming out of the hospital.

"Tut-tut! That's a nice thing to say—you ought to know better! Don't say no more," another voice called the speaker to book.

"Well, what would you 'ave me do to that meat hound? All right, cuff 'is ears."

"... be court-martialled like a traitor," wound up Spivak. "Even in those days. If we hadn't got the better of the Germans, say it was they got us bottled there and not we them, and we'd a month, a week, a day to live, we'd have lived it like decent human beings, not like swine. That was in '42. Now let the Germans talk about 'War, can't be helped.' It's their tune, not ours. The first man who said 'War, can't be helped' was a German. Yes, a German. In heart, if not by nationality

—it makes no difference. And you repeat it, young man, like a parrot, forty-eight times a day. It makes one sick to hear it.”

Spivak got up, took his cap off the shelf and put it on his head.

“It’s a pity those two invalids and the old man who sat here have gone. They’d have told you what war is, and whether every Tom, Dick and Harry can be allowed to juggle with this word and tack it on to smutty stories.”

There was a chorus of approval from all sides. Apparently Spivak was not alone in taking exception to the young man’s flippancy.

“That’s taken ’im down a peg! Right on the nail!”

“That’s the stuff, Captain!”

“First ’e was mum, then ’e let ’im ’ave it straight from the shoulder!”

The passenger in the hat sat red in the face and flustered, looking like a duck in a thunderstorm.

“Maybe, Comrade Captain, I was a bit wrong,” he stammered at last.

“Sure, just a wee bit,” answered Spivak with a derisive smile, “like the deacon at the marriage ceremony who instead of the words ‘Rejoice Isaiah’ sang out: ‘What the devil made me marry a second time.’”

The unexpected quip and the Captain’s smile raised a loud laugh all round. Until then he had been speaking so angrily that people, though listening with interest and manifest sympathy, had shot nervous glances at him and refrained from laughing aloud at the discomfited passenger in the hat.

“Maybe I’m wrong. . . . It’s a current phrase nowadays. Everybody uses it. . . . Of course, when you come to think of it, it isn’t quite right. Decidedly wrong, I should say. I admit I’m

in the wrong. But there's no need for you to go off the deep end, Comrade Captain. You've never set eyes on me before. It isn't right." The young fellow got up, and, reaching for his trouser pocket with his left hand, he fished out a wallet. "You think I haven't seen any fighting? Here, take a look." He held out a batch of papers for the Captain's inspection.

"Yes," said Spivak, unfolding the papers and perusing them. "You've been fighting. In '42 on the South-Western, eh? And at the Karelian front too? Well, yes, you've been fighting. . . . You've probably got only a vague idea though what you were fighting for. . . . You were at the Western front too? At three fronts? . . . Well," he went on after a pause, handing back the documents, "what shall I tell you? I'm reminded of a little incident, Comrade Retired Junior Lieutenant, that happened in our unit. I'll tell you about it, but don't take offense. Our Major-General told it to us. He was our divisional commander. One day the General relieved a regimental C.O. of his command. I must admit this officer wasn't much good as a soldier; he didn't fit into the conditions of modern warfare. He couldn't handle a situation. Didn't do much except raise a lot of fuss and pother. When we got a licking he didn't grow any wiser, and when we pitched into the enemy it didn't teach him anything either. Nobody in the regiment regretted his going. Anyway, our General did the right thing. But some brass hat at headquarters took this regimental commander under his wing and stuck up for him, saying that, after all, he was an old-timer who had been fighting on seven different fronts. The General didn't have any use for him. You couldn't put him in charge of the transport company—him being a Major. So the General says: 'Well, what if he has been at seven fronts. . . . Now, I've got a suitcase in which I've been lugging my things about ever since the battle of Halhin-Gol. That suitcase has been in Mongolia, and Finland

and Poland, on all the battle fronts here from Leningrad to the Black Sea, and has even been with me in the German rear. It's been all over the place with me. But a suitcase it was, and a suitcase it still remains for all that....'”

All the passengers who had been hitherto asleep on the upper shelves were awakened by the laughter in the compartment. Those who had not made out the Captain's last words asked their neighbours to repeat them.

The train slowed down as it drew into a station. Spivak straightened his belt and shirt and threaded his way to the door.

In the vestibule he knocked into the chief conductor who was coming in from the next car.

“Ah, it's you! Very glad to see you,” Spivak said in the same irate voice he had used in rebuffing his fellow-passenger a few minutes before. “Don't you think it's about time you put up notices: ‘Smoking’. ‘No Smoking’, eh? What d'you say? Throw the hint out to your chiefs. Why put it off? It can be fixed up first thing before sending the train out on the line. Why haven't we got any water in the car, conductor? The train was standing for three hours near a water pump, the pump was in working order, yet you didn't fill the tanks. War—it's all the same—is that it? People can do without a wash, eh? Do you wash, I wonder, or have you also put it off until Germany surrenders?”

The chief conductor, dumbfounded by the Captain's angry outburst, could only gape and spread his hands. Without waiting for a reply, Spivak jumped out onto the station platform.

In the car the passengers were still laughing and noisily discussing the Captain's recent harangue.

“He's a hot 'un, the Captain!”

“He'll have a go at the station master, I bet you.”

Meanwhile Spivak paced up and down the length of the platform, muttering to himself: "Silly ass! It isn't for men of that type that we're fighting the war. Dolt! Suitcase!" and rejoicing in the resinous breath of pinewood he gradually calmed down.

Dusk was falling. The sun went down behind a cloud. The locomotive was resting on low steam. The railway station was quiet. Nightingales trilled in the grove. The assistant station master, passing down the tracks, mentioned that bombings were frequent further down the line and that unless the next junction signalled them in, their train would probably have to stay there overnight.

Spivak continued pacing the platform deep in thought, wondering why he was so irritable. He had been home, to the district where he had worked in the local Party Committee before the war, but had not relaxed there, had not rested. Must be nerves, he thought. Or, perhaps, he should not have taken that trip to the rear,—and have stuck it out at the front till the end of the war. Well, there wasn't any harm in getting a glimpse of life and people. At least he'd know how the land lay in case he managed to pull through, and come out of it alive.... No doubt he'd be demobilized after the war. He wasn't a regular army officer, having been called up from the reserves—he was getting on for forty. There'd be enough young men to fill peacetime commissions. Still, you never know, he might be told to carry on. Well, what hadn't he been in his time? Started life as a shepherd, then a tractor driver, Party organizer on the collective farm, instructor of the District Committee of the Party, and—who knows?—if he stayed in the army long enough, he might become a General.... Spivak grinned.... Not likely. His hair had turned grey rather early in life. And it was a long cry to a generalship. In peacetime there was no prospect of getting one

under sixty years. There'd have to be another war for a couple of years or so. To hell with war, he'd do without the generalship. Give him his collective farm back again. . . .

Women came up from a nearby village with fresh warm milk of the evening draw, which they began to vend in front of the train. Spivak ate a big chunk of bean pie and drank a litre of milk. He fancied a glass of clotted milk, but nobody seemed to be selling any.

"Hullo girls, don't you people here go in for clotted milk?" he enquired of the women. "Don't know how to make it? On my way back from Berlin I'll drop in for a day and teach you how to do it. I'll show you the way my wife makes it. you can eat it with a fork!"

"That's right. Comrade Captain, drop in to see us!" chirped the women. "You might stay for good while you're at it—you'll be welcome."

"We don't mind more captains like you!"

"Aye, the more the merrier."

"What good's he to us, girls—why, he's grey."

"Maybe, but look at 'is medals!"

"Grey, be blowed! What was your bloke like? He was bald, he was. I'd prefer to see a fellow with grey hair than one with no hair at all."

"You come and see us, Captain. Take no notice of those giddy girls!"

While chatting with the women, Spivak drank another half litre of milk with a sweet patty and was fully restored to a cheerful frame of mind.

The locomotive puffed louder and faster, drowning the rustle of the wind in the poplars lining the platform and the song of the nightingale in the grove. The assistant station master appeared with the departure flag and hurried down the platform.

"The junction says O.K. I'm giving the departure."

Some one shouted out:

"All aboard!"

The women waved their white napkins after the departing train.

Spivak stood on the car platform for quite a time, smoking and gazing at the lowering clouds in the west and at the steppes until earth and sky merged into a single dark patch and the telegraph poles sailing past were no longer visible to the eye.

* II *

CAPTAIN SPIVAK had been wounded for the fourth time since the war began, and had undergone hospital treatment in the town of Poltava where, upon his discharge, he was allowed ten days' leave. And so, in the third year of war, he had his first opportunity of going home for a short stay, a fact his comrades envied him for when he got back to his regiment. He managed to get back to the same division with which he had marched from Stalingrad to the Dnieper, and the very same regiment where he had been serving as regimental agitator. However, it had not been easy for him to find his unit. While he had been in hospital and visiting his home, the army had driven forward considerably, without, of course, leaving any address by which it could be found, and it might be in Rumania or Czechoslovakia for all he knew. Travelling by train to the last station on the line undergoing repairs, Spivak spent several more days hitch-hiking over the countryside in the army's rear, until he finally got on the tracks of his unit. Having found the army dumps, it was no difficult matter to discover the whereabouts of the political department where he received his assignment for duty to his old regiment. In this regiment there was a fellow villager of his, Battalion Commander Nikolai Petrenko. Spivak had been recalled from the farm and promoted to district Party work, and Petrenko, from the same collective farm, named "Bolshevik," had been given a post in the District Land De-

partment as district agronomist. They had both been recruited to the army at the same time.

While he had not yet fully digested his own impressions of what he had seen and heard at home, Spivak gratified his comrades' curiosity about life in the rear in a humorous vein.

"You're not missing anything," he said. "It must look pretty rotten to an outsider. We here are being glutted and spoiled with army rations and allowances—we've got a complete set of togs, soap allowance up to date, tobacco rations as well. As for food rations—me and my men'll have nothing short of government straight. We've got no worries about the daily bread. We get everything we need, like under real Communism. At home the wife gives you such a beanfeast of allowances and rations that you start howling and want to cry on the bosom of our quartermaster whom we now curse up hill and down dale if we don't get a box of matches when it's due. She'll tell you she hasn't got any shoes to go out in, the flour's all gone, and there's no more firewood left. I had a clean break of six days at home out of my furlough, not counting the journey. On my way home I hugged the idea of doing some duck shooting—hadn't held my double-barrelled gun in my hand for three years. Well, believe me, I didn't get a chance. Two days I helped my wife dig up the potato patch—she made me do it, officer's stripes didn't mean anything to her. "Never mind," she says, "you're a home-bred officer off the collective farm, it's no disgrace for you." Another two days I carted up faggo's from the woods for firewood; it took me two more days to look up all the relations—and before I knew it, my leave was over. You make a time of it here boys while it lasts and while the government is paying your keep."

"How's life?" he answered on other occasions. "Well, it's like this. You're a company commander out here. You've

got all kinds of buddies, young fellows and elderly men, but they're regular army trained guys and do things properly the way they're told. Out there you'll be given a farm brigade consisting of Grandpa Panka who was a fossil before the war started, Gammer Yavdokha, a young thing of seventy, and a bunch of cheeky soldiers' wives who'll answer you back ten to the dozen like a blessed machine gun, and a bevy of shavers who used to run about without knickers on when we went to the army. Go ahead, take command. There are your ploughmen and your harvesters and sowers. Or you'll be put in charge, say, of a machine and tractor station. There are your tractors, you'll be told, lying among the weeds. Go and hunt around all over the steppe for scattered wheels and pinions. You'll find the block of one of 'em without the pistons, the pistons of another without the connecting-rods. The harvesting machines look a miserable sight, all smashed up and peeled—the Germans used 'em to make iron buckets with. The other machines are ruined too. No bearings, no belts, no nothing. And carry out the repairs plan within a month, if you please. Why, you'll say—I'd rather force the Dnieper another five times under enemy fire than have myself brought up daily on the local Party committee carpet and be pounded into a pancake without even smelling powder."

About the railway he said:

"Traffic is beginning to run smooth again. But if a fellow has weak nerves I wouldn't advise him to travel yet. First of all, if you're a bad sleeper and have dreams of going over the top you'll very likely tumble off the luggage shelf. Secondly.... Well, there is no secondly. Because, if you tumble off that shelf the odds are that you'll be buried at some godforsaken station before you get home."

Lanky, with a slight stoop of his shoulders, nervous and vivacious, though outwardly wearing a perpetual scowl, Cap-

tain Spivak enjoyed a joke when he heard one, but he never smiled at his own humorous quips, and one was never sure when he spoke seriously and when he was making fun. Only when his eyes would grow round and gleam, his voice become hard, his face pale slightly and he would throw his cap or his map-case onto the ground, did one know for certain that the Captain was in earnest. He was a stiff arguer, rather brusque in his treatment of his comrades and had few friends in the regiment. His quick temper, combined with an invariably morose countenance, equally unchangeable in moments of high spirits or in anger, made him, in the words of his comrades, look like a booby trap—you could never tell when and how it would explode. But indulgence for a man's brusqueness of manner and irascibility is never bestowed more readily at the front than when it is known that that man is doing his bit. Sluggards are not tolerated at the front. Spivak was well spoken of in his regiment as an agitator. His lectures and talks with officers and men were popular. He did not shine particularly in point of erudition and eloquence, but he expressed his thoughts forcibly and wittily and could hold the interest of his audience. His combat record and reputation were unimpeachable. At least three quarters of his time he spent in the infantry companies, appearing at headquarters only when summoned by the regimental assistant commander in charge of political service, Major Kostromin, to draw up his five-day political reports. During battle Spivak was a welcome guest in any battalion. The battalion commanders were very keen to have him down at their outfits when important action was in the wind.

It was generally noticed that Spivak had come back from his furlough more morose and touchy than ever. Some put it down to family troubles, others said: "What's ten days' leave—just to upset a fellow. Only Senior Lieutenant Petren-

ko, in command of the second battalion, guessed the state of mind his friend was in—something he had seen back home was evidently bothering him. The few days he had spent at home had indeed disturbed him, but not the way some people supposed, taking it for nostalgia. He had simply not got something off his chest, not clinched an argument with someone back home.

Spivak ran his regiment to earth while it was on the move. Offensive actions were still being carried out on this section of the front. The division was pushing forward in the first echelon. He did not have an opportunity of talking with Petrenko immediately about his domestic affairs. He met him during a brief halt at a conference at the regimental commander's, handed him some letters from home, and promised to look him up that day in his battalion. But he did not. Instead, he went to the First Battalion whose C.O. had been killed in battle the previous day, where he acquainted himself with the new replacements and commanding officers who had come to the regiment while he had been away, and appointed new agitators. After that he spent a day with the tommy-gunners and another day with the artillerymen. He came to Petrenko's battalion only after the close of a skirmish for possession of a farmstead, the regiment's objective being to surround and smash the enemy in the village of Lipitsa, an important strongpoint in the enemy's defences.

... It was a pitch-black night. In the evening, when the men were relaxing after mess at the farmstead—nobody, by the way, seemed to remember the name of the place, it was something like Yanchin or Yanichkin—a thunderstorm broke out over the steppe, accompanied by a cold wind and a heavy downpour. The rain made a noise in the ravine like a rushing river. The scouts reported that the water had ousted the Germans from hastily dug trenches near Lipitsa village.

They could be seen in a flash of lightning scrambling out onto the breastworks and pumping the water out of the dug-outs. The rain did not last long. When the battalion was due to go into action the weather had calmed down and the torrents of water had drained off. The men waded across the stream in the ravine, the water not reaching above the knees. The clouds, however, had not dispersed. Not a star was visible in the sky. The thunder still rumbled in the near distance and was almost indistinguishable from the gunfire. Momentary flashes of lightning lit up for a second the ungainly figures of the men in drenched, billowing tent-capes moving through an open field.

The column was marching across a stretch of fallow land. The men's feet slipped on the wet grass, but there was no mud to mash through. The carpet of grass was short and thick and succulent—one could feel it by the crunch of the boots. Grass like that was a slippery experience even in dry weather. Captain Spivak, walking alongside the column, seemed to sense a delicate agreeable odour amid the rude smells of smoking campfires and the reeking, sodden clothes of the men. The scent came from underfoot. Spivak stooped in his stride and pulled up a handful of grass. He crushed the rough, moist leaflets between his palms and raised them to his nose. One of the men bent over for a sniff, followed by a second and a third.

"Mint," said one of the men softly. "Treading on mint we are. Smells wonderful!"

"So it is," said another low, incredulous voice—orders had been passed down the column to march in silence. "Why, the place is full of it! How comes it here? Wild, I suppose?"

"No, it ain't," replied the first man, "it's cultivated. It's a paying thing, this herb. We cultivated about three hectares of the stuff at our collective farm. Made quite a decent bit

on it we did, several thousand rubles. Gee, it smells fine! Cram it in your pockets, we'll brew some tea with it."

"So it's cultivated? I didn't know that. Might have guessed, there's no end of it here. Looks as if they went on cultivating it under the Germans too. Must be a favourite crop of theirs."

"No, it's probably left over from the collective farm. It's a perennial herb, grows straight from the root."

"Maybe some landowner sowed it? The landed gentry were here till '39 you know."

"Maybe. . . ."

The column came to a halt. A broad, high-banked water gall obstructed their way. Somebody sighted a small white boulder in the darkness and started rolling it towards the water gall, but those in front overcame the obstacle, some taking it at a running jump, others slipping down into the mud and scrambling up the sides on all fours. The column moved forward without stopping and those who had fallen behind had to run to catch up with it. The sky was clearing in places, and the stars began to show amid the tumbled clouds. A raw inclement wind blew from the North, one of those winds which suddenly sends night frosts down on blooming orchards in the middle of May after sultry days of summer weather and warm thunderstorms. Short, drowsy bursts of machine-gun fire came occasionally from the direction of Lipitsa village and the glare of rockets lit up the clouds. Under the feet of the marching men there still lay the soft, slippery, scented carpet.

"At our collective farm," the man who had spoken about the mint was relating in a low voice to his comrade, "they planted a hectare of roses. Everyone laughed, said they were wasting time on trifles, it wasn't a man's job to fiddle around with flowers. You wouldn't believe the money they raked in on those roses!"

"What, selling 'em for button-holes?"

"No, we delivered 'em to the government. Now, to you and me a rose is just a rose, a flower. But this was a special kind of rose. They make rose oil out of the petals—what they call senshal oil of roses. You won't get more'n a pood of oil from a hectare, but it's worth ten thousand."

"Go on! I guess it wouldn't taste bad in the porridge, eh?"

"You wouldn't touch it. It ain't edible. It's used for perfumes. To look at it you'd think it was just plain alcohol, but you wouldn't drink it, tastes nasty...."

"It's not a bad idea, you know," went on the speaker more loudly after a little pause—he was the owner of a soft, melodious tenor—"to go in for some o' those thingumbobs as a side line to corn and buckwheat and sunflowers. On a big farm you'd always have something else to fall back on in case one of the crops didn't turn out right. Now take colander—we cultivated that too on our farm. It's also a senshal-oil plant, but what exactly it's used for I couldn't say—don't know. Stinks like hell. Smells of bugs. Starts you sneezing a mile off. When it comes to threshing the damned stuff you want a gas mask...."

"Here, drop the farming topics and tongue-wagging!" growled B.C. Petrenko in an undertone, springing up out of the shadows. "You tillers of the soil, leave threshing for when you get home."

"O.K. chief," whispered the loquacious soldier and shut up.

The battalion moved along for several minutes in utter silence.

B.C. broke the silence himself:

"Coriander, not colander!" he threw over his shoulder in a low voice, and quickened his pace to overtake the head of the column. "Who was holding a bull-session about essential oil crops? Zavalishin? Co-ri-an-der. Essential oil, not senshal.

Savvy? Because they contain essential oils which are used in perfumery. It's an important item of export—worth it's weight in gold. And a pood of rose oil before the war sold for fifty-five thousand, if you want to know, not ten. Don't dawdle there behind, close up! We'll have a smoke when we get to the ravine."

The B.C.'s little speech drew from Spivak an involuntary smile.

"Touched his weak spot," thought the Captain, remembering his friend's agricultural calling. "Doesn't he like everything shipshape!"

The battalion was making a detour around Lipitsa. They had swung off to the left, and their object was, on reaching a spot eight kilometres away, by the three mounds at the forking in the road—marked off as 1743 on the map—to turn sharply right and come out into the enemy's rear. They had crossed the mint field, and two narrow strips of winter crops and ran into a dense thicket of gorse. They beat about in vain for a way round it, but there did not seem to be any end to that thicket. The men finally plunged through the prickly brush, throwing the hoods of their tent-capes over their heads to protect their eyes against the sharp twigs. The thicket brought them out onto a viscous tillage. Here everyone's breath became more laboured. The ground had been freshly ploughed. Perhaps it was sown—there was no sign of new shoots in the darkness,—or perhaps one of the inhabitants of these pillaged, ransacked villages had, yesterday or the night before, gone over this field with a plough, alone in the deserted steppe with his horse and plough, paying furtive tribute to the immemorial usage of his peasant ancestors, while the sounds of cannon drew nearer from the East and the Germans were harnessing the few remaining horses to their supply carts, driving off the cattle herd and warning every-

body under pain of death to go off into the woods.... The mud on the upturned clods of rain-sodden earth was caked by the cold wind. Huge lumps of earth clung to the men's boots. The soldiers, many of whom carried heavy machine guns, long-barrelled anti-tank guns and battalion mortars on their shoulders, had difficulty in dragging their feet out of the mire and swayed with fatigue. Spivak heard Zavalishin's voice again:

"The best technique's the footsloggers. Evening, midnight, mud up to your knees, water up to your chin—they'll get through by hook or by crook! No bogged-down cars, no gear trouble, no hot bearings!"

"Sh-sh!" Junior Lieutenant Osadchi hissed at him. He had taken over command of the Fourth Company from Lieutenant Metreveli, who had been wounded in the farmstead skirmish and moved back to the medical battalion. "Who's that, Zavalishin at it again? You can chew the rag, can't you?"

A dark figure detached itself from the head of the column.

"Halt!"

Spivak recognized Petrenko's voice. The B.C. stepped aside and sat down. Spivak went up to him.

"Who's that?" asked Petrenko. "Is it you, Captain? What d'you think, Pavlo Grigorievich, have we done eight kilometres?"

Spivak and Petrenko allowed themselves the liberty, when alone, of calling each other by name and patronymic. Petrenko was Mikola Ilyich to Spivak, or just Mikola, and Spivak was invariably Pavlo Grigorievich to Petrenko.

"Eight kilometres?" echoed Spivak. "I think so. We started at nine o'clock and now"—he glanced at the luminous dial of his wrist watch—"it's ten fifty-five. Yes, we've covered it. What are you looking at, Mikola?"

"There ought to be three mounds here, according to the map. We turn off here. There's something over there; I can't quite make out whether it's them or a cloud."

Spivak gathered up the skirts of his tent-cape and squatted down beside him. The gloomy sky almost merged with the dark earth. The line of the horizon was lost in the clouds which still covered a part of the sky.

Smiling at the thought that suddenly struck him, Spivak asked his friend:

"Where did you acquire that habit, Mikola, of lying down on the ground when looking out for something in the night? It's the habit of a man of the steppe country, isn't it? You'd be guarding the oxen let out to graze and manure the corn field on a May night, and clamber onto an old haystack, snuggle into the hay and take a nap. You wake up to find the oxen gone. You tumble down the haystack, lie down on the ground and peer around, wondering where the devil they'd got to. You can see them better against the sky. Over on old Okhrim's winter-field there seems to be something moving, looks like waving horns. Off you go to round 'em up before old Okhrim is up and about. But before you can gather your wits the old bouncer dashes up behind you and gives you a slash round the legs with his whip. The next day the boss will put in his little bit when he finds out that the oxen had been straying. Have you ever herded them, Mikola? Rotten brutes. If they get it into their heads that the grass tastes better elsewhere they'll make a bee line for the place like a drunken Fritz in a psychic attack, the devil himself won't make 'em swerve. Once I hunted 'em up twenty kilometres away, down by Kapustin's farm."

"What makes you go off about the oxen, Pavlo Grigorjevich?" said Petrenko. "You were home, I suppose?"

"I was," answered Spivak, his voice still holding a note

of amusement. "I saw people working on the farm. Had a feel of the plough handle...."

A faint glow lit up the sky over the village and pale-blue flashes of sheet lightning played amid the clouds. Either something had been set on fire over there or the Germans were feeling nervous in anticipation of the circle being drawn round them that night, and were sending up rockets again. Three steppe mounds stood out against the pale sky.

"That's them," said Petrenko, getting to his feet. "Follow me, step out!"

The crackling of machine guns ahead became more audible as the column advanced. The ground underfoot was harder again, the going easier on dry brittle weeds intermixed with young fresh shoots.

Petrenko stopped the battalion by a disused steppe well with a broken crane in a small depression and spread the men out by companies.

"Lie down! Company commanders step up! Gorbenko, Nezameyev! Lieutenant Dobrovolsky, let them have three more tommy-gunners. Reconnoitre the edge of the village. They've probably got trenches there. Some devil's firing tracers over there. Get out onto the road. Take some nippers with you in case there's wire."

Sprawling on the ground Petrenko drew out of his pocket a piece of newspaper and tobacco, rolled himself a cigarette, and covering his head with his tent-cape, he lit up for the first time that night. To right and left of him, spread out fanwise with heads together lay the company commanders who had come up to receive their combat orders. From behind came the clatter of the signalmen unwinding the wire drum as they ran the wire from regimental command post.

While Petrenko, taking his bearings by a tall building that loomed dimly on the edge of the village, a church faint-

ly silhouetted against the rocket flashes, and a windmill standing on the common, was tentatively indicating the point of attack, machine-gun positions and the tasks of the tommy-gunners, Spivak, together with the Party organizer, Lieutenant Rodionov, an elderly bewhiskered man of huge build, formerly an Odessa longshoreman, was conferring with the agitators. Not a single agitator of Spivak's old trainees was left in the Fifth and Sixth companies.

"Whom shall we appoint for the job?" he asked the Party organizer. "What sort of replacements have you got? Are there any suitable boys?"

Rodionov named several platoon commanders who had recently been enrolled in the Party, squad commanders, members of the Y.C.L. and privates who had received awards in recent battles.

"Well, call 'em up, one at a time."

The Party organizer, taking care not to disturb the relaxing men, called out the nominees from the various companies. Spivak had a chat with them.

"Fresh recruit? Out of hospital? But you're a new one in this outfit, aren't you? That's what I thought.... Where were you fighting? On the Southern and the Fourth Ukrainian? Stalingrad too? Good.... What were you doing in civil life? Cold-working metals mechanic? I see. Something I don't know. Cold-working you say? Well, you're an educated soldier and have been blooded in; you're a candidate for Party membership too—I appoint you agitator. D'you think you'll manage? If there's anything you don't know, I'll help you. Bear in mind, though, that cold-working won't get you anywhere here. You want the hot stuff. It won't do just getting it off the reel and forgetting about it. All right, lie down now and get some sleep, we'll talk about it later."

Another one he asked:

"Did you ever have to retreat?"

"Yes, Comrade Captain. Retreated from Kerch in '42. I felt ashamed to ask for a glass of water from the Cossack women in the Kuban...."

"Where did you start the advance?"

"From Tuapse. I was in at the kill at Rostov. Kiev too."

"Well, well. So you've had a thorough schooling. Ten classes plus the corridor? What's your family? How many boys has your Dad got fighting?"

"There are eighteen of the Osipov family boys fighting up to date, Captain, including cousins."

"Good.... Sniper?"

"I do a little when we're on defence."

"Keep count of 'em?"

"Twenty-seven up to date."

"Good.... Education? Seven classes? And a Y.C.L. member in the bargain? Well, you'll be agitator in your outfit. You'll teach 'em to fight the way you did. Go and get a rest in the meantime. By the way, Osipov, try to steer clear of phrases like 'up to date', and high-flown expressions when speaking to the men. Try to use plain language like you do at home when speaking to your brothers or your mother. You wouldn't say to your mother: 'Mum, I've made up my mind, up to date, to marry,' now would you? Be particularly careful not to put that high kind of stuff over out here. There are no foreigners here, the boys are Russians and Ukrainians. If they put you in a tight hole with some question, say, about the isolationists in the United States or the Polish emigré government in London, or anything you're at a loss to answer, the Party organizer, Rodionov here, will help you, or the battalion commander, or I, if I'm on the spot. Better be frank with the men and say, 'sorry, comrades, I don't know, I'll find out and tell you later,' than to get into a mess."

Summoning fifteen agitators from various outfits Spivak said to them:

"We're getting near the frontier now, comrades. I don't know how you feel about it, but personally I'll take it hard if we let the Germans who have been living in our towns and villages, who have seen our black earth country, and been eating our bread, our grapes, our cherries and our pork fat, slip out of here alive. There's a saying, that a pig has a short memory for the stick but a long one for the place where it has been gorging. . . . I've recently come back from the rear. D'you know what's on the mind of every man and woman laying the first bricks on the ruins? God help us, they say, to build up a new life that'll be better than the old one. The main thing is to build it on such a foundation that it will last for ever. The people who have had experience of two years of life under the Germans beg us to give Jerry such a thrashing that he'll never come this way any more and that none of our people will ever have to relive the horrors they've been through. Our diplomats will no doubt come to an agreement with the allied countries about the post-war arrangement of the world, about making the world safe against fascism once and for all and against any chances of a second Hitler appearing in Germany twenty or thirty years hence. This will be specially discussed at the peace conference. It's not for us with our soldiers' nerves to attend that conference. Our diplomacy today, while the guns are still roaring, is a simple one—to bottle up and destroy the Germans, not to let them get across the frontiers alive, and if any manage to slip through, to go after them and finish them off. Here's our task—to wipe out the Germans in this village. Divisional intelligence reports that they're as thick as fleas in an old pelt. They're beating a retreat, but throwing out rearguard teams to fight a delaying action. They've a kind of strongpoint out here. Road

crossings. There are a lot of machines, even tanks, they say. That's all O.K. This isn't the Yanichkin farmstead where we only managed to bag ten firebugs. We've got to wipe out the whole show. Is that clear? Your battalion, don't forget, is going to operate on an important section. When things start getting hot for them on the other side, they'll all make a rush to escape rearwards, unless they put their hands up, and try to break through. And it's your job not to let 'em! No matter how hard they push! Not one of 'em is to slip through with a whole skin. Tune yourselves onto that wavelength and explain it to the men. Let's have more of the mousetraps and pockets—those are the army's orders. We're going to be pocketers today too. Ours won't be as big, perhaps, as the Korsun-Shevchenko pocket, but large enough for a good hall. Everything's clear, I believe, eh? Any questions? How do you stand for ammunition? Have you anti-tank grenades? Have the tank destroyers sufficient cartridges? The artillery may come up, but you'd better rely on your own resources. It's going to be hot. That's all I wanted to tell you, comrades. Pass it on to the men in your own words. How you say it is your business. Say it in words that will strike home. You can now go and take a rest. I'll be seeing you in the morning. . . . I'll get regimental headquarters on the phone and let you know the latest radio news."

Rodionov intended looking up the Sixth Company where three of the men during the march had expressed their desire to become Party candidates and had asked him for references.

"Who are they?" asked Spivak.

Rodionov told him the men's names. Two of them were old-timers.

"Look here," said Spivak, "I'll testify for those two. Khuzhmatov—isn't that the one who's been transferred from the regimental scouts? The one who can't see properly in the

dark? And Korobov—he's the light machine gunner, isn't he? I know them as well as I do you. We crossed the Dnieper in the same boat. They should have been enrolled a long time ago. I guess they've worked off their candidate's qualification term in advance."

Covering his head with his tent-cape, Spivak, in the light of a pocket torch, wrote out two recommendations in his notebook, and tearing out the sheets, handed them to Rodionov.

"Well, if you're going to the Sixth, I'll look up Osadchi in the Fourth. . . . I say, Rodionov, don't go sticking your head where it's not wanted, try to keep cool. We haven't a political assistant C.O. and probably won't get one soon, in any case not before replacements turn up. There's been such heavy casualties among the political personnel in the regiment that Major Goryunov's getting the wind up. 'I'll have you up for breach of duty for every wound you get,' he says."

Petrenko was finishing dispensing his orders.

"Those who get into the village first, be sure to light a bit of haystack—but not on the edge, a little way in, or you'll be giving our own outfits unnecessary illuminations. One haystack'll do. No sense in burning more. Don't waste time trophy hunting. If you run into any stores, post a sentinel and move on. You, Osadchi, take the right flank—mind you don't make any mistake about the trophy machine guns the Third Battalion's using when you hear 'em. My C.P. will be on this spot. I'll shift over to that tall house. That's about all, I guess. Any questions?" Petrenko yawned. "Get back to your companies then. If there'll be any changes when the scouts come back I'll let you know through the runners."

Crouching low amid the tall weeds, the company commanders went back to their respective units. One of them, a young C.O. of the Fourth Company, Junior Lieutenant Osadchi, stopped in his tracks, remembering something, and running

back to where Petrenko sat, he squatted down on the ground next to him.

"Comrade Senior Lieutenant! Can you let me have a couple of sticks?"

"What d'you want 'em for?" Petrenko asked in a sleepy voice.

"Why, to light the hay with. You're always telling us: 'Think everything out to the littlest detail,' well, so I just thought of that detail—nobody's got any matches. I've run out of 'em too. I've got a box, but no matches."

"You're a pretty poor thinker," said Petrenko turning over on his side with the obvious intention of going to sleep. "You can set it alight with a tracer bullet.... Haven't the men got any tracer bullets?"

"Yes, they have. You're right, I didn't think of racing bullets!"

"There, you see. Here, take this to make sure," added Petrenko, drawing a cigarette lighter from his pocket. "Give it back to me when the battle's over.... So you hope to be first there?"

"Sure. I managed all right when I was platoon commander, Comrade Lieutenant, and I don't think my company'll cut a poor figure."

"O. K. We'll see. All right, get along."

Osadchi got to his feet.

"It's tracer bullets, not racing," Petrenko threw out after him as he pulled his coat over his head. "From the word trace, time you knew it, Lieutenant." With which he quietly snored himself to sleep.

Spivak came up to Petrenko and sat down silently without disturbing him. The only occupants of the little gully by the well beside himself, were Petrenko, a reserve platoon of tommy-gunners, the battalion clerk Makar Ivanovich Kra-

pivka, well known in the regiment for his rendering of old Gypsy ballads to the accompaniment of a guitar, signalmen and runners from each company. All except the signalmen and Tommy-gunners were asleep. Towards morning it became chilly, there was even something of a frost in the air. Spivak felt chilled to the marrow and tried to overcome his drowsiness for fear of freezing. Petrenko's snores did not excite his envy. If the men were fagged out through lack of sleep during the last few days, still more so was their battalion commander who, in addition to sharing the mileage with them, had had plenty of extra cares which curtailed the already brief snatches of respite between battles and marches. He needed a rest badly. It was a saving trait, that knack of going off plump to sleep, making the most of every available minute, despite the cold and inconvenience. Were it not for this habit, no man could stand the strain of this life of battles and marches. Men would be killed by sheer exhaustion, and not by the shells and bullets of war. He had slightly fallen out of this habit during the past three months, having taken things easy in the hospital. For Petrenko this weather, after the winter frosts, was mild and pleasant, whereas his own fingers were numb with cold and he was unable to roll himself a cigarette.

Reconnaissance brought nothing new. The village, from this side, did not look as if it was fortified. The rocket shooting and chatter of machine guns came from the other side of the village where other battalions were preparing to attack. Our scouts had run across some trenches in one place on the common, but they were deserted—very likely the rain had driven the Germans out of there too and made them seek shelter in the cottages. The marginal houses, however, which had been explored by the scouts, did not reveal the presence of either Germans or tenants. There were no barbed wire entanglements

in front of the village. The trenches did not run in an unbroken line and had no communication passages.

"All right," grunted Petrenko in a voice hoarse from sleep and the damp. "All right, but not quite. You haven't found out anything. Jerry's not such a fool as to leave his rear uncovered. If he's decided to make a stand here it's not likely that he hasn't thrown out something to protect his rear. Back you go! If you don't manage to get here before the attack begins send one man through to report, the rest of you tack on to any outfit that comes along."

Petrenko remained awake after the scouts had gone. There were still two hours to go before the attack began.

"Well, Pavlo Grigorievich," he said turning to Spivak, "how are things at home? Let's hear about it."

Spivak moved closer.

"Well, everyone's all right.... Did you read the letters? They're all living on the collective farm. My wife went to her sister's place at Zolotonosho when the Germans came—no one knew her there. She lived under another name. Your wife, I believe, evacuated to Alma-Ata—she writes you about it. They're all back now. Working on the farm. Everybody's well and alive. I've seen your kids...."

"My wife's sent me some photographs," said Petrenko. "I don't recognize 'em. The youngest especially. Looks kind of tousled and wild."

"He wouldn't recognize you either. How old was he when you left? A year? Well, of course he wouldn't know you.... No, the kid's all right, a lively little fellow. It's the photo. Maybe he cried when they took it, got scared of the photographer...." And after a pause added: "My brother Ivan's killed, Mikola, you know."

"No? Ivan? Your brother? My wife writes me about Ivan having been killed, but I couldn't make out which one."

"Yes, our Ivan. Got an official notice. Killed on the Zhitomir direction. . . . Commanded a heavy machine-gun squad. Somehow he got a bit too far out with his outfit before the infantry came up. One of the crew survived. He was picked up wounded, and he told how the thing happened. Ivan threw the last grenade at a box of mines. Posthumously awarded the Order of the Red Banner. They wrote saying where he had been buried. I don't remember the name of the village. Mother wanted to go there, but I dissuaded her. Better wait till the war's over. Maybe we'll go together then. . . ."

Spivak named people of their common acquaintances, farmers, school-teachers, members of the village Soviet and local authorities who had been killed at the front, had lost their lives fighting in partisan units or been executed by the Germans. Petrenko maintained a grim silence. He knew practically all of this from his wife's letters. At rare intervals he interrupted Spivak with a question as to where this or that acquaintance got killed, under what circumstances, or with an exclamation: "No, you don't say so? And he too?"

"Yes, a storm has swept the country. Sorrow has knocked at every cottage door. . . . But those who are alive are back at their old places. Luka Gavrilovich is chairman at our collective farm. Semyon Karpovich is First Secretary of the District Party Committee. Fedchenko's on the District Executive Committee."

There was a rustling noise amid the tall dry weeds next to the speakers, followed by the heavy thud of a falling body and the rattle of a rifle. Spivak started up.

"Who's there?"

"That's all right, Comrade Captain. It's me, runner from Company Four, Zavalishin."

"What are you doing there?"

"Oh, I tripped meself up."

"How d'you manage it? Sleep-walking?"

"Those darned buzzers have drawn their wire across here somewhere. Tripped me up."

"Wire?"

Zavalishin drew nearer.

"What's that trailing behind you? Bend down. There, what's that among the weeds? Puttees? And you said—wire. Call yourself a soldier! Treading on your own feet.... You won't die a natural death, Zavalishin, from what I can see of it. If Fritz doesn't send you west, your missus'll choke the life out of you between her knees for the joy of seeing you when you get home."

Zavalishin sat down on the ground, wiped the bolt of his rifle with his sleeve, laid it down beside him and began to rewind his puttees.

"Really, Comrade Captain, the puttees have nothing to do with it; I stumbled over the wire.... She won't choke the life out o' me, Captain, she's too old, my wife.... Drat it. I hurt my knee!"

There was a pause.

"The Germans have played the devil with the countryside...." Spivak resumed. "You wouldn't recognize the farm. All the buildings have been burned down, the land's overgrown with weeds. The farm implements and machines are wrecked. Only one radiator's knocking about in the garage—all that's left of seven trucks. Nothing but young stuff at the dairy farm, stock's got to be bred anew. The damage has been calculated at three million rubles, prices taken on a rough average. As for the human suffering, no sum'll cover that...."

"Still, how are things getting on now? How's the sowing? D'you think they'll manage it?"

"Yes, I think they'll do it. The people say—you fight on, we'll supply the Red Army. Ukraine's now coming into the

corn market, things'll be easier for the country. They started last winter delivering corn and potatoes as voluntary contributions to the Red Army fund. Believe me, Mikola, when you look at those bread-winners of ours, the servicemen's women-folk and the youngsters, and the men working on the local bodies, what they're up against in trying to put the farms back on their feet—it's pretty tough, just another battlefield, by God it is. . . . They'll tackle the sowing all right. They're using what's left of the tractors for ploughing, and horses too that our army vets dropped behind as rejects, and cows, and just spades, digging up the earth by hand. They finished sowing the early cereals while I was there. The amazing thing is they did it nearly on pre-war schedule time, like we used to do in the old days. Only on a lesser area. I think they'll make a decent job of the sowing campaign—it's easier than any of the others. It's going to be hard when it comes to weeding and harvesting."

"D'you mean to say, Comrade Captain," asked Zavalishin, "that the war won't be over by harvesting time?"

"By harvesting time? Depends how things turn out. We'll have our hands pretty full. We've taken Ukraine, but that's not all there is to it. Got to finish the brute off in his own den—that's the task Comrade Stalin has placed before us. Better not pin your hopes on a speedy end, you won't suffer disappointment. . . . What parts do you come from, Zavalishin?" Spivak asked after a little pause.

"I'm from the Kursk Region, Comrade Captain."

"Did you have the Germans there?"

"Yes, damn 'em. My folks write me that the bastards didn't leave a stone standing. Ate up everything in the place, carted off all they could put their hands on. Stripped the people clean. The collective farm folk are very hard up."

"What's your opinion, Zavalishin, how long will it take us to put things back the way they were?"

Zavalishin pondered this.

"Well, it's this way, Comrade Captain. . . . It's not as if I was a real farmer. I don't understand much about farming. A little while back Comrade Senior Lieutenant put me right about the senshal oil plants, but then I never handled 'em myself. I was working on the collective farm as carpenter. My father was a carpenter and my grandfather before him—we're a family of carpenters. My father, when he was dying, said: 'I'll forgive all wood gnarls, but the fir gnarls, drat 'em, never!'—they must have been a pain in the neck all his life. It's the nastiest thing you can imagine, a fir-wood knot. You can't stroke him against the grain, or down the grain or anything. You'd be planing away at him in the sweat o' your brow and just when you're on the last lap he'd crumble to pieces or come flying out o' his hole. . . . It's a carpenter I am, Comrade Captain. I can't speak for the rest of 'em, how all the brigade leaders and livestock breeders'll do their part o' the job, I can speak for myself. I've been thinking a lot about this ever since I started getting letters from home and found out what the Germans had gone and done out there. . . . I was working in the collective farm right up to '41, since 1930. Nigh on twelve years. D'you know what I'd done in that time? I logged up twenty-two houses for the collective farmers, built two standard type cowhouses, two pigsties, a club house, a bath house, fixed up a four-car garage, a flour mill, a poultry-farmhouse, and other odds and ends—things like hothouse frames, cart bodies, rakes, spades, no end of 'em. Well, so I've been thinking to myself, Captain—now I've done a good bit, but took it easy like, in my stride. I was thirty when the collective farm was started at our place. What was the hurry? Life had a long way to go yet. You'd whittle at a log a bit, then

measure it, then sit down to have a smoke or admire the scenery. There wasn't much of a hustle in the winter time either. Field work was over, and you'd make a slack time of it too. Half the winter you'd take things easy, have a good time, you know the way it is in the village, and getting nearer the spring you'd set to work overhauling the farm implements—the building work could wait till summer. Now, if I don't get killed and the war'll soon be over I'll be getting on for forty-five. My children are all grown up. This is the time to get busy. It's not a bad thing to put in a little work for the children's sake, to see them at least having the good things of life—to tell the truth I wouldn't mind having 'em back again for myself too."

"You mean you're going to step on it?"

"No mistake about it."

"We'll rebuild quicker than we built, eh?"

"Sure. It'll be like working on a ready model, Comrade Captain. Now, say I—a carpenter, not a cooper, mind you—was to try my hand at making barrels, seeing as I never made 'em before, and was to spend the best of a day over one of 'em the first time, and say two days the next time. That wouldn't do. If I spent a day over the first one, the next one should take me half a day. . . . Now I was thinking, Comrade Captain, that if I was given a suitable mate who could tumble to the job, a fellow like me who was hungering for the feel of his axe, between us we'd knock the show together in two or three years, just as it was before."

"Yes, cottages and cowhouses—they'll go up faster than anything else. . . ."

Spivak took a long time rolling a cigarette between his numb fingers, wetting and licking down the torn paper.

"I was wondering, Mikola," he said at length, "what there's more of now among the people—sorrow and misery, or a

craving for the good things of life. The ruin has had a two-fold effect on people. It scares the faint-hearted, while those with more grit in them are digging in for all they're worth, working with a kind of savage ferocity. I believe you, Zavalishin—if you took up the axe now in place of the rifle you'd give those wood gnarls a nasty jolt. And, besides, the people are labour-starved—I mean starved for free labour. The German idea of 'village community' couldn't be called labour, when people had to be driven out to the fields by force! Only one man in our village built a new cottage during the German occupation. Nobody planted fruit trees, nobody tried to breed more farm animals. Now they've bestirred themselves. One fellow's mending his fence, a woman in another place is thatching her roof, a third is running up a hen-roost in his back garden out of a derelict truck body. Life is coming into its own. One's sorry for the dead, but one wants to have his own innings. It's a hard innings, but then people think: 'Haven't we overcome difficulties before in our lifetime?' D'you know, Mikola, who cheered my heart back home?" said Spivak, lighting up under the skirt of his tent-cape, with the flame in his cupped hands.

"Who?"

"The manager of our machine tractor station, Petro Akimovich Romashenko. Good boy! Works ever so much better than he did before the war. Now, what did he have to boast of before the war in comparison with the other M.T. Stations? Nothing to write home about. If you remember, he was ill most of the time, kept on nagging to be sent down South, some kind of stomach trouble—used to take the mineral waters cure, fifty-fifty, half a glass of vodka to half a glass of soda. Now he's working like the devil. Marvellous, the things he's doing. He had seventy tractors before. Now he's assembled and repaired a hundred and seventeen machines from

odds and ends picked up all around the countryside and even presented forty-seven tractors to some of the neighbouring M. T. Stations. He restored the workshop in two weeks. Built polishing machines, turning lathes, and boring machines out of old rubbish. There wasn't any petrol to work the shop motor, so he had the combine motor converted into a gas engine and gets along with his own supply of wood fuel. Somewhere on the forward lines the Germans had bombed one of our motor spares dumps, so he took a trip down there and salvaged bearings and pinions and things under a rain of bombs.... He has the same personnel problem to face as everywhere else,—dragged old pensioners out into the daylight, put the girls and kids on the machines, but they're all full of ginger, let me tell you that. They signed and sealed a mutual competition bond with some other M.T.S. and have already had two check-ups. Arranged *Voskresniks** to help build new cottages for their workers who had suffered through the Germans. Romashenko, you remember, was a stove-setter before the collectivization—well, he showed he hadn't forgotten the use of the trowel at these *Voskresniks* when he began laying stoves in the cottages. When they told me at the farm how well the tractors were working—the girls did as much as eight hectares' tractor ploughing a shift in their first year—how they were helping the collective farms during the sowing campaign, how the M.T.S. manager himself knew no sleep, tearing around from one farm brigade to another, helping to get motors started, ploughs adjusted—well, when I met him in the street I fairly hugged him.... The man feels rather small when it comes to looking us servicemen in the eye. It strikes me he's got a kind of wrong idea about what the rear actually means today, though he's working in it him-

* A Sunday devoted to collective social work, from the Russian word *Voskresenie*, meaning Sunday.—*Trans.*

self. The fellow's our age, thinks he should be in the army too, but he's on the essential employee exemption list. He was beyond the Volga for a year and spent six months in a replacement camp. In short, he hasn't been in the fray. He feels chapfallen about it. The war, by the looks of it, is drawing to an end, and he hasn't had the chance of popping off a single Fritz. But I told him: 'Look here, Petro Akimovich' I said, 'the Order of Lenin is awarded for both civil and military service. It's that kind of decoration no one can tell where a man got it—at the front or in the rear. If you carry on as you're doing now, be the first to complete the harvesting in your region, you'll get the Order of Lenin—count yourself then a serviceman. . . .' He and I had a proper blow-out before I left!"

"Was it split?"

"No, it was straight goods. Ninety-six degrees. Got it from the chemists. He saw me off to the station. Very nearly took a header in a kerosene tank instead of the passenger car."

"D'you remember Maxim Babeshko?" went on Spivak. "The old partisan and Order-bearer, the one who used to work as chairman of the Yurkovka Village Soviet? Couldn't say that he used to come off with flying colours either. All he did was marry and remarry. He was hauled over the coals for neglecting the efficiency drive and got it in the neck for bungling meat consignments. He wasn't even one of the common or garden kind, just a back number. Now the fellow looks as if he's been rejuvenated. Commanded a partisan detachment against the Germans. Derailed two military trains. Made a daylight raid on State Farm No. 2, captured a big supply train, snuffed out a couple o' hundred Germans, they say, seized a lot of cattle. The old war-horse woke up in him. They appointed him manager of that same State farm—while I was there he started cereal sowing on the pre-war acreage. Using the same oxen he captured from the Germans. Got a partisan

medal and a second Order of the Red Banner. I told him when I ran across him at the district committee: 'I see now, Maxim Korneyevich, the best way to keep the first medal bright is to go after another one!' They're all right for personnel down there—not as many as they had before, but still.... The underground Komsomol organizations were active under the Germans. A lot of servicemen have come back. Three of the field brigades at the *Udarnik* collective farm are regular highball outfits—every man jack of 'em is a lieutenant. Went to war as privates and sergeants, came back officers. One's minus an arm, another walks on crutches, but they keep their form—always wear their uniforms, stand up when answering a question at the farm board meetings, always in good trim and razor shape. The chairman's an ex-captain, also a war invalid. On the whole, Mikola, they'll have things going nicely from what I could see of it. A hell of a lot of damage has been done, but life's making a comeback...."

"Things are all right, Mikola," Spivak resumed after a short interval. "I mean, comparatively speaking. Don't stand comparison with pre-war days. Still, two M. T. Stations are functioning already in the district—first thing they did was to put the collective farms back on their feet. The Germans couldn't shake the people's love for the collective farms. Down at our *Bolshevik* farm, Grandma Solokha alone of all the people somehow managed under the Germans to get a horse of her own; picked up a three-legged war cripple and doctored it up. When the collective farm came back it took two weeks wheedling to make her place it in the farm stables. Things had to be explained to her from the beginning—the advantages of the collective farm system, how she used to live before the war, how she got so many tons of corn in payment for actual work-days put in, and so much sugar premiums for beet deliveries—she had two sacks of lump sug-

ar at all times in the larder. She shed a tear or two over the mare, they say, and brought her to the common stables. And now she's working as team leader in the third brigade. Did more hand digging during the sowing campaign than anybody else. The women in her team have already knocked up seventy work-days. That same mare carries water for the tractors.... The people have had twelve years of collective farm life before the war started and they've learned to know a good thing by experience. Everybody just dreams of having things back the way they were before the war. Still, the situation back there is pretty complicated. It's not merely a question of economic difficulties. What I don't like is that some of the people on the local bodies don't seem to be able to grasp the situation and see the new claims life is now presenting...."

Apparently Spivak's ideas and impressions were only just falling into their proper places while he was talking of conditions at home. He spoke in long pauses. Petrenko did not ply him with questions, for he sensed that he would say what there was to say without prompting.

"Some people haven't got the hang of what has happened yet.... It was one long dark night when the Germans came. The Soviet government arrived—and it became day. Everything's in ruins, admitted, but still it's day.... Victories are won at a heavy cost. Every man should feel that law and truth have come back. You've got to give each matter careful consideration, and not allow numskulls to cast a gloom over the people's joy at our victories—nowhere, not in a single farm, not in a single family!..."

"Why, are there such cases?"

"There are.... I'd been thinking of it at the time we were retreating. Now, thought I, here are we withdrawing to the very Volga,—look at the territory we're leaving behind and the millions who are going through hell under the Ger-

man occupation; yet time'll be when some wise guy will throw it in their faces that they didn't evacuate one and all, or think up something equally clever. You and I don't have to be told what evacuation looked like in those days. We were retreating, so we know what it was—the road would be clear in the morning and inside of two hours our reconnaissance would report having sighted German tanks ahead within twenty kilometres. All kinds of things have happened."

"What exactly's on your mind, Pavlo Grigorievich."

Spivak was so long in answering that Petrenko tried another one!

"Who were in the *polizei* at your farm?"

"There were three of 'em—Maxim Yukhno, Panas Gorbach. . . ."

"I thought so. As soon as I heard the Germans had taken our place I immediately thought of those fellows as likely hangmen."

"Yes, Yukhno and Gorbach. . . . Yuhno took back his father's house where the third brigade was fixed up, and was trying to get the flour mill through the local authorities. Panas Gorbach served a labour sentence for theft at some special construction job near Lvov during the war—he came home together with the Germans. The other was Kolya Kravchenko."

"Don't know him. What Kravchenko is that? Oh! That's the fellow at the stud farm who rode the colts for us?" exclaimed Petrenko. "Our trainer? The fellow who got a bonus for the stallion? You don't say so! Kolya?"

"Yes, Kolya. . . . Blest if he knows himself what made him do it. The lad's only seventeen. Grew up on the collective farm. What fault could he have found with the Soviet way of life? They say it started with him trying to dodge

the labour mobilization for Germany—they were rounding up the youngsters at the time. To escape being bagged, he went and joined the police force. His father, the old sap, didn't interfere. They imagined it would be something like the village constables in the old days—delivering summonses and notices, calling the villagers to meetings and that kind of thing. But then, they saw this was something different. The police were given rifles. His old man then says to him: 'No, sonny, this ain't square. It's not a stick they've given you, but a rifle. You'll be shooting at your own brethren.' Kolya began to see daylight too, but it was too late to back out. He strutted about the village with a gun, herded prisoners of war and stood guard over prisoners in the *Komandatur*. Everybody you speak to now sticks up for him as one man. 'We've never seen him commit any brutalities' they say. People relate the following incident. One day the commandant arrived to hold a meeting, ordered all the people to be assembled at 5 p.m., but two girls were a couple of minutes late—so he ordered 'em to be given twenty-five strokes of the lash. He happened to clap eyes on Kolya at the moment, so he gave him the job. Kolya took them into the office, into an empty room—the girls themselves told the story—looking as pale as a ghost. 'Look here,' he says, 'you holler with all your might, and when I let you out, you turn on the water-works,' and began whacking at his own boots. When he let them out he went to the commandant and reported: 'Your orders have been carried out.' He served a couple of months and then beat it. He must have gone to some relatives of his—they've got kinsfolk down Mirgorod way—or he may have tried to get through the line to our people and perhaps the Germans killed him on the way. Anyway, there's no news of him. Well, now there's his father, a veteran worker, an eternal farm labourer in the old days, and his old moth-

er, working at the collective farm piggeries—she never earned less than four to five hundred workdays, she was also a Stakhanovite. His brother's serving in the Red Army. And such a stain—a *polizei* family."

Petrenko wanted to ask Spivak something, but the latter went on without paying heed, warming to his own narration.

"Yes, Mikola, people had a hard time under the Germans. Forty-two boys and girls from our collective farm were driven off to Germany. I daren't even tell you who. Almost all your team-leaders—the Stakhanovite girls. Your experimental worker, Marina Kolodyazhnaya...."

"Marina too?..."

"Yes, Marina's been taken, and Nadya Babicheva, and Olga Zikun, and Natasha Kurepchenko. Ivan Shaliga's boy and girl were taken too. Some folks used to get letters while the Germans were still there. All the youngsters from our district are in one place, in Cologne, working at the factories.... At the mere thought of being torn from their homes the girls were prepared to mutilate themselves to escape being carted off to Germany. Some of them did. Scalded their hands with boiling water, poisoned their legs with something or other. They say the Germans were particularly careful at the medical examinations to have people with clean skins—they were afraid to bring anything contagious into Germany.... Well, the collective farmers had plenty of horse-whipping—I mentioned that. The commandant did his bit, then the overseer'd come on his motor bike and knock people up out in the steppe. Flogging be damned—why, any fellow like Gorbach or Yukhno could just walk up to a man and shoot him like a dog and get away with it—just say it was a case of sabotage! At the *Rassvet* collective farm they hanged brigade leader Zinchenko, who won the Agricultural Exhibition medal—they pinned the medal onto his shirt and kept him swinging like

that for over a week. . . . They strung people up in the district centre, in the square facing the cinema. . . .”

“Yes, people had a rotten time. You’ve got to bear that in mind. . . . Grandpa Okhrim, our beekeeper—two of his daughters are in the Y.C.L. and his son’s a lieutenant in the tank corps—he was that scared when the Germans came, do you know what he went and did? He brought a pig to the commandant’s office as an offering. Now he doesn’t hear the last of it—‘collaborator,’ they call him. He confessed to me candidly: ‘Well, yes, Pavlo Grigorievich,’ he says, ‘I was scared for the children’s sake. Death’s horrible when you look at it. When you’re up in town there’s always new ones dangling on the ropes by the cinema. My girls are Y.C.L. members, you know, and everyone knows how they criticised Hitler and wrote posters in the club against the Germans. . . . I slaughtered one o’ the pigs and took it down. Gave it to them, sort of palm grease. When I did that it struck me—well, today I gave ’em it of my own free will, tomorrow they’ll take all the people’s pigs and cows just the same. What difference does it make?’ ‘The difference is this, Okhrim Ignatovich,’ I says: ‘You truckled to the enemy where others didn’t bend the knee either before the enemy’s tommy-gun or the gallows, they didn’t lose their pride. Still, as far as I’m concerned, I wouldn’t have you punished severely for it. Like the priest in church who puts you under religious penance for your sins I’d make you undergo a labour penance. There are twelve hives left in the bee-garden, you managed to keep ’em safe—good for you. Now you go ahead and bring ’em up to three hundred, in three or four years say, so that the honey can be pumped in tons like before the war, and everything grows and blossoms and gladdens the heart so that we forget the cursed memory of these Germans, God blast their souls! . . .’”

"It's a mighty big question, Mikola, to go into everyone's behaviour during the German occupation," continued Spivak. "But it's got to be done. That's what I'd begin with if I was sent to work on a collective farm that had been liberated from the Germans. Now, we had a manager of the 'village community' back at our place, and brigade leaders, didn't we? There were people who were glad to accept the post and others who were obliged to because they were elected. D'you know who was the brigade leader of the vegetable gardens during the German occupation? Miron Makovets, the old fellow who used to talk so sensibly at all the meetings, who was working at one time as quality inspector. Well, the collective farmers themselves elected him. He didn't want to, wouldn't hear of it for a long time, but they persuaded him. 'If you won't, somebody else will, Miron Fomich,' they told him. 'Never mind, we rely on you. You won't ill-use us and we shan't let you down.' Well, he had to carry on, he had no option. If anything wasn't done on time, he'd be fined a thousand rubles as the man responsible for the brigade. He had to carry out orders. But he didn't ill-treat people. There was no ill-usage, no swearing, or anything of that kind. He wangled people jobs they could cope with, released them from work in cases of sickness and gave mothers of suckling infants work that was near home, just like he used to do in the collective farm days. Though he wasn't connected with the resistance movement, and nobody knew him or put him up to what he had to do, he did things in proper resistance style—yet even now the old man doesn't blow the gaff about it. Soviet leaflets were read in his brigade quite openly, and they rendered relief to servicemen's families out of the common pool. They pickled a consignment of twenty barrels of cabbage that had to be delivered to the Germans, and it all went bad—they'd put something in it to spoil it. Just when

the Germans were preparing to retreat they saved six pairs of oxen by hiding them in an old shanty—blocked up the entrance with piles of straw and climbed in through the roof to feed 'em. The kitchen garden brigade is now the envy of the farm as regards draught animals. Well, what can you make of him? Looking at it formally you can't get away from the fact that he worked as brigade leader in the German village community.' Collaborator, eh? Yes, but how did he work? That's what you've got to ask people. Now, take the superintendent of the 'community,' Timofei Kozinsky...."

"Timofei was superintendent? Timofei Markovich? Our cattle breeder?"

"Yes, Kozinsky. Well, this one turned out to be a rotter. He never visited the fields unless he had one or sometimes two of the *polizei* with him. He always went about with an escort. It was a case of loyal service with that fellow, not fear. Fools that we were, we never thought of making enquiries at the *Andrukov* State Farm as to what sort of a guy he was and why he quitted that job. Well, he showed his colours all right when the Germans came. He worked himself black in the face for them, and made people work day and night.... One night when they were doing horse threshing, he dragged Motya Pereyaslova's sick little boy from his bed—you remember the lad, he was a schoolboy attending the first class—and made him drive the horse. The kid whimpered, but trudged round and round all bent up and shivering—he had an attack of the ague; then he sat down on the driving gear urging on the horse from there, until he got caught in the cog wheel by his coat. By the time they stopped the horse he was dragged three times round the drum and there was not much of him left."

"Where's the fellow now—Kozinsky?" asked Petrenko.

"In jail. The whole bunch got caught at Stepanovka, including Yukhno and Panas Gorbach...."

The signalman behind Petrenko's back stirred on the ground and started muttering into the receiver cupped within his hands:

"Daisy. This is Daisy.... Hullo there. Acacia! Daisy on the line. Hullo. What'yer blowing for—is it hot? This is Daisy!.... Sleeping yourself, you deaf chump! Nothing much.... Quiet. They're popping away a bit.... No, your way."

Petrenko turned his head.

"What is it? Asking for me? Find out, Pisarev, whether 47's there."

"What d'you want him for?" asked Spivak.

"He promised to send up a couple of guns from Solovyov's outfit."

"Ah, they'll come in handy. The tanks won't go for Solovyov because of the bluffs. They might send 'em our way, though, for a breakthrough."

"Hullo, Acacia, call 47 to the phone. Acacia! This is Daisy. Acacia! Let's have 47.... He's not there, Comrade Senior Lieutenant," said the signalman. "He's gone to the neighbouring outfit on the right. 45's there."

"The Chief of Staff? All right, let's have him."

Petrenko took the receiver across his shoulder with his left hand without turning round.

"Hullo. Yes, that's me.... Nothing new, Comrade 45. Quiet and as dark as.... Giving the lights, but not to us.... The centre.... I see the windmill.... Sure, just like we had it docketed. I'm making the big house. Yes, the road's mine. No, here all the time.... I wanted to ask you.... Aha, yes, yes.... They'll be here by dawn, you say? Fine.... Well, I've nothing more. S'long! He says they'll come up by dawn,"

said Petrenko handing back the receiver. "Don't fall asleep over the phone, Pisarev. Why don't you answer Acacia?"

"I wasn't asleep, Comrade Senior Lieutenant. He was asleep himself, that fellow at the C.P. end, Nezhevenko. Or maybe he doesn't hear. The trench caved in on him during the Yanichkin fighting and now he's deaf on half an ear. You keep shouting a thing twenty times and all he does is blow into the receiver like he was cooling his tea."

"Well, Mikola Ilyich," resumed Spivak, "if I were now the chairman of a collective farm, I'd put the case like this: they're my people, I'm to work with them. I'd check up on them myself. I'd ask about each one of them at the general meeting. We weren't home those days, we don't know what happened. And folks are mad against the traitors. If you bring it up at the meeting they won't keep anything back. A man won't make allowances for his own brother. Provided he really was a German toady. But I wouldn't allow people to settle old scores on the quiet. What can be worse than accusing a man of being a German lickspittle? No, I'd check things up myself. To my people I'm their chairman, the head man, a sort of father—I've got to live with them. And, by Jove, you take my word, the folks would make work hum and it would be all the merrier at sowing, weeding and harvesting time. . . . As for men like Prokopchuk who come visiting our farm, I'd simply turn 'em out neck and crop. Sending representatives like him out to the collective farms this time of day to supervise important campaigns is like appointing a horse doctor chief surgeon in a heavy casualties ward. . . ."

"You talk, Pavlo Grigorievich, as though I'd been home with you and know all about it," said Petrenko. "Who's Prokopchuk? When did he come to the farm? Before the war or recently? What have you got against him?"

"I like that—who's Prokopchuk? There's only one Prokopchuk on the district administration. Vasya Prokopchuk, the chairman of the local co-operative board. He came down to help with the spring sowing preliminaries. Not before the war—just recently, after the Germans were kicked out. Don't you know that wind-bag? He's made such a holy mess that you need a spade to clean it up. Because of one bitch he jumped to the conclusion that all women are the same, and used to shout at them: 'You've all been messing around with the bally Nazis!' He accounted for himself to the womenfolk by saying: 'I'm exempted because I'm an essential employee.' They asked him: 'And our men ain't essential? What are they—good-for-nothings, made of poorer stuff? Is that why they were sent to the front?' Well, what more can I say for him? How he went about hunting up trophies and tried to take Grandpa Tyshko's German pants off him? You know old Tyshko, when he gets started you'll never hear the end of it. 'What,' he says, 'these old pants truffies! Maybe you'll take me blisters as well, seein' I got 'em from lugging about a Rumanian kit bag?' The silly ass had to go to loggerheads with the old fellow over a bit of rag. The man had his last cow killed by the Germans, his house burnt down and all his clothes stripped off his back, and Prokopchuk has to go lecturing him: 'I see you've taken a fancy to Hitler's monkey clothes? Why don't you stick the German eagle on your cap while you're at it?' And the old fellow comes back with: 'You stick it on yourself,' he says, 'stick it on your bloomin....'

"Well, that's pretty clear," said Petrenko with a wave of the hand.

"If it's clear why are you so keen about having the details?"

From somewhere out of the darkness, low on the ground, the voice of a lark stole on the ear. The call was taken up

by another one nearby. The sky was still dark and no glimmer of daybreak was yet visible in the East, but the early birds were already making ready to greet the dawn. Neither Spivak nor Petrenko gave the slightest sign of consulting their watches. This was not their first nightly vigil in the open steppes, and they had long since learned to guess the time by the stars, the dew, the freshness of the air and the birds. The awakening of the larks meant that there was about an hour and a half to go until daybreak. By what signs did the larks know the approach of dawn? Perhaps they too read it by the stars? Or do they hear sounds which the human ear cannot catch—the twittering of birds far away in the East where the sun had risen earlier?

“That’s how I’d start about it, Mikola Ilyich, if I had a magic wand, or rather if an order by our People’s Commissar of Defence Comrade Stalin was to switch me back to some collective farm at home out of this here hollow. People would be my first concern. Oxen and cows don’t till the land; it’s the human hand behind the plough that does it. Raise a man’s spirits and he’ll put his soul into his job and get through three or four times as much work. Don’t you agree? Our chairman, Luka Gavrilovich, doesn’t attach much importance to these things. ‘My job’s to rear crops,’ he says. He’s as cool as a cucumber. Even the war hasn’t had any effect on him. Like water off a duck’s back. Well, I guess you know him as well as I do. His obsession’s cows and calves and dog-carts and seeding machines—anything you like but the human element. Mind you, he’s an old hand, knows his business from A to Z, and when it comes to a transaction, a dozen speculators couldn’t get round him. He’ll sight a flaw in the tillage three miles off, and as for sowing and harvesting and the how and when of it, he’s had his eyeteeth cut. But that’s about all. You know the dairy and stud farms we had—well, he

knew every blessed calf and foal by its christian name and surname, its whole pedigree, and when it was born and when it had the diarrhea. You couldn't say that when it came to the children. One day some kiddies of the Pioneer organization asked him to let them have a truck to take them up to town for the jamboree. He says to them: 'What did you come to me for? You're from the *Peremogi* Farm, ain't you? You've got four trucks of your own—let them run you down.' They tell him: 'But we're not from *Peremogi*, Uncle Luka, we're from your farm, the *Bolshevik*.' They called me in as witness. Didn't I give him a ragging over, those kids! 'Why,' I said, 'we've got less Pioneers than we've got calves—how come you don't know them, Luka? They're your future Stakhanovites, tractor drivers, combine operators, brigade leaders. You're calf-biased old man, you've a one-tracked mind!' Well, he hasn't changed a bit. He's even grown fatter, got himself a little pot belly. If he had someone by his side all the time to egg him on, he might learn to trot in the right direction in his old age. Now, he couldn't think of anything better than to appoint that *polizei* scoundrel's wife—Yukhno's—as cook to the tractor brigade. 'Well, what's wrong?' he says. 'She held that job for five years before the war. None of the women can cook as good as she. Must have been all right if the German officers put up with her cooking.' And Motya Pereyaslova, whose boy they killed at that night-threshing job and whom Maxim Yukhno beat up with his stick more than once, works like a carthorse, carrying sacks of seed on her back out to the fields to that same tractor brigade. Or take another case. You remember Marko Nedostup, who used to be in charge of the mill? Well, he's in the counting-house now. People say that when the Germans came he started a tannery business in partnership with Yukhno, employed hired labour, used our Russian prisoners of

war for private jobs about his house by some suspicious arrangement with the commandant, built himself a new house during the occupation, and generally had a swell time. He seems to have feathered his nest when the government changed hands. He bartered flour for all the junk there was in Poltava. They say his house is crammed with furniture and rugs. Now he's working as assistant bookkeeper in the farm office. And Luka simply doesn't take any notice what people are saying about the fellow. And what they're saying is: 'It makes you sick to see that beefy mug of Nedostup's when you go to the office. He's made capital out of our misfortunes.' Marko now tries to whitewash himself: 'I saved the prisoners from being ill-treated,' he says. And the neighbours'll tell you how he fed 'em—mangel-wurzel slops without bread. As bad as in the prisoners' camps. . . . You see, the point is that unless this matter is gone into there are bound to be mistakes on either side; a man will have a false charge pinned on him while some rat will get away with a whole skin and hang out Soviet colours. It's a tougher problem than it looks. Of course, it's easier to count calves and foals. That's what I don't like about Luka. A man comes back to his farm—after the Germans, after the front, after all the horrors people have lived through—and goes on working just as if nothing had happened, just as if he had gone out of the office for a couple of minutes to go to the lavatory. . . . What the hell, I feel so cold, Mikola!" exclaimed Spivak with a shiver. "Chilled to the marrow. Has it been snowing somewhere, I wonder?"

He fumbled beneath the tent-cape for his flask, drew it forward by the strap and shook it.

"What d'you say to a splash of warmth?"

Petrenko remained unaffected by the seductive sound of the liquor. He never touched a drop before battle.

"I don't want any. Take a drink yourself."

"Right-o, we'll have a drink afterwards. It'll be still colder at sunrise...."

Saying which he fondled the flask for a minute or two, then unscrewed the cup, filled it and drank off the contents.

"Hem! Never put off for tomorrow what you can do to-day.... Yes, Mikola, things are pretty complicated back there," resumed Spivak. "You meet a person, Fedot, say, or Malasha, and as you look at them and talk to them you think to yourself: It's Fedot all right, yet it isn't the same man. Dear, dear, how much poison those Germans have tried to fill your minds with while we were away! For two years the children didn't attend school, you didn't read the Soviet newspapers and the Germans tried to din into your heads all kinds of tommyrot about the land and 'the new order.' On the other hand, you think—you've also had an eyeful of what we at the front never had any idea about. D'you know, Mikola, some newspaper correspondent came down not long ago to the *Udarnik* collective farm and chatted with the farmers, and took photographs of some of the folk—well, can you imagine it—when he'd gone a rumour was spread that he was a German spy and had made up a list of Stakhanovites for Hitler.... Zavalishin, are you asleep?"

"No, Comrade Captain." .

"What you said about yourself, Zavalishin, was quite right. Yours is a soldier's soul, a simple soul. You spent three years of your life in honest fighting. All you need to do is throw off your army coat and you're a Stakhanovite again. But back there, after what people have been through, you've got to handle every person individually."

"It was one thing to put a man on his mettle about achieving new labour records when everything around him was blossom and sunshine, when his cottage was filled to the

ceiling with corn and his children grew up in joy and plenty," went on Spivak. "Combines and tractors did half the propaganda work for us. And today, maybe, that Stakhanovite has lost her husband and son, her daughter's very likely in Germany and she herself's grown ten years older during the war. Where are the tons and the millions that stood us in good stead then? They've got to be made again. D'you remember, Mikola, how we used to work in the '30's? You weren't in the Party yet. There were Communists in the village—some had jobs in the co-operative society, some worked at the post office, others ran their own farms. The Party told us all to join the collective farm and show the people the way. For three years running I didn't know what it was to have sufficient sleep; I never went to bed before three in the morning. Meetings, conferences, rallies, lectures. You'd be allocated a neighbourhood or a brigade or a hundred-homes section and be told that you answer for it with your Party card. Before going out to see people you'd check yourself a dozen times: now what will I say if I'm asked this or that question? You'd sit nights over a newspaper or a speech of Comrade Stalin's and reach a state when you'd start talking to yourself. But then I knew my hundred families like I did my own, because I'd been in every one of those homes dozens of times and had dinner there and drunk tea with the family, or just looked in to play with the kiddies. I knew why Manya Petrusheva nagged her Mikita day and night against joining the collective farm—because they were to be enrolled in the first brigade and Mikita's old sweetheart was also in that same brigade. All you had to do was to sign them up in the second brigade. Yes, we put in some stiff work during those days. Those were the pioneering days! The combines, the collective farm gardens, the theatres and magnificent incomes were yet to come. You had to inspire people with our Bolshe-

vik dream, convince them that that's just how things would turn out if the collective farm system came into its own. Things became easier afterwards, when life itself proved that the Bolsheviks were not vain boasters. And now you've got some people who can't see how things have changed as a result of the war. Since our district was liberated, Semyon Karpovich has been down to our farm only once. People are expecting to have the secretary of the District Party Committee, Comrade Serdyuk himself, or the chairman of the District Executive Committee, the head of the local Soviet administration, pay them a visit, and have a heart-to-heart talk with them and thrash matters out, instead of which they send down a fellow like Vasya Prokopchuk, whom I wouldn't trust to read the divisional newspaper to the men. The son of a gun would make a mess even of that. He'd read what wasn't there, and instead of saying 'help a comrade in battle' he'd make it sound like 'save yourself who can.' "

"Why doesn't Serdyuk look us up?" asked Petrenko.

"Well, apparently, he still goes about with the old idea that our farm was one of the leading ones, that we have an experienced chairman, and he thinks we'll manage to get along ourselves.... As a matter of fact, Semyon Karpovich was never too fond of taking the air. He has his own style of doing things—the dispatcher style. Ring you up on the phone, read you a lecture, and give you directions without getting up from his desk. He preferred his phone to his automobile. But then he had somebody to rely on. Now they haven't even got the car but some kind of Rumanian rattle-box minus springs which he shares with the District Executive Chairman Fedchenko. Still, as things are now, I'd have even those darned telephones which some of the village Soviets managed to save cut off and drowned in some bog or other,

so there'd be only real live contact with the farms and none of that *ersatz* stuff handy. . . . What's Jerry up to, I wonder?" he said, raising himself on his knees and looking out towards the village. "Not a sign or sound of anything. Could they have skedaddled? Doesn't look like it, by the shooting on the other side. Perhaps there aren't as many of 'em as was reported."

"We'll find out when we get there," said Petrenko. "I don't like this stillness, Pavlo Grigorievich."

"Neither do I," answered Spivak.

Spivak glanced at his watch. Twenty minutes to go before the artillery attack would begin. The battle was to be opened by the divisional and regimental ordnance. Nothing was said for a time—one was busy collecting his thoughts to resume the thread of his narrative, the other was pondering what his comrade had been telling him. Zavalishin lay on his elbow at their side.

"That Vasili Petrovich Nikitchenko of yours, the chief of the District Land Department, comes down pretty often to our farm," continued Spivak.

"Nikitchenko? Has he come back too? Wasn't he in the army?"

"He came back with Serdyuk. He comes down two or three times a week. Prokopchuk used to pay us occasional visits, to supervise sowing preparations, but Nikitchenko has been permanently attached. He's in charge of the agitators' collective in the Alexeyev section. But he lacks the right spirit for a good agitator these days. When he came back from evacuation and saw what havoc the Germans had wreaked in the district—all the stock-breeding farms destroyed, livestock killed or driven off, crop rotation all messed up—he lost his nerve and hasn't come round yet. He goes about sighing over every crater. 'Here used to be the cowhouses, five

hundred head, fitted with running water and electrical milking apparatus. . . . Here the electric station used to stand, supplied current to five farms. Here was the vet hospital. . . . When will it all be rebuilt?' Goes about moaning as if it happened only yesterday, and of course his mood infects the collective farmers. He takes after Luka Gavrilovich. That one's calf-mad, and this one's plan-crazed. People all look alike to him too. He'll sit all day in the farm office drawing up farm work schedules, and sigh over the abacus trying to split two neat between three brigades, yet won't take the trouble to find out whether the soldiers' families are getting their pensions, whether any relief is being afforded them out of the farm funds, whether their men write home and what they write about. If he makes a report about the spring sowing he goes on about everything under the sun—drill harrowing and corner ploughing and trailers and what not—things the farmers know backwards without him, and when the meeting breaks up he suddenly remembers: 'Dash it, I've forgotten to give 'em the latest communiqué—our army's taken Odesa!' When the lasses kicked up a row out on the fields on account of the poor feeding and brought out the fact that two cans of cream cheese had been allowed to go bad in the buttery and wanted to know why the deuce the cheese hadn't been given out to the brigades working in the fields where they could have cooked curd dumplings with it, he tried to talk 'em over by saying—'Now, look here, comrades, what are you kicking at the food for? What did you have to eat under the Germans, anyway? There wasn't any public catering among the brigades at all. You carried your own lunches with you from home. And you worked nevertheless.' What d'you think of him as an agitator! Comparing things with the German 'village community.' It's the easiest thing to bring over that kind of stuff—'Had a taste of

the Germans, eh?' You often hear that argument now back home. The fellow who hasn't sense enough to think of anything better to say keeps harping on that string—'Had a taste of the Germans, eh?'—but he couldn't for the life of him tell you any more about the Germans and what they stood for. I remember Nikitchenko back in the days when he used to work as Party nucleus secretary on the *Molot* newspaper—I used to meet him at conferences in the Political Department. When he started speaking you'd wish yourself dead—it was that boring and tedious. 'Today,' he says, 'I scheduled visiting eight collective farmers in their homes, which plan I've overfulfilled, having visited nine and had a talk with another one in the street.' The chief of the Political Department asks him: 'What did you talk to him about?' 'Oh,' he says, 'had a general chat about the Paris Commune, harness repairs and so on.' Blessed street-corner cabbler. I can't stand those fellows, Mikola, who sit on the market place under an umbrella patching up shoes. One blighter in Poltava mended my boots for me, and I hadn't gone two blocks when my foot wriggled out through the toe. He'd cut the vamp clean off, the idiot. Must have been blind. Ruined a good pair of boots. Ever since then I'm afraid of 'em... Zavalishin!"

"Yes, Comrade Captain."

"You here? Not sleeping? Well, listen to our self-criticism..." Then he went on: "The second secretary of the Party committee is a good worker. He's a new man, recently sent down by the regional committee. A colleague of yours, held the post of chief agronomist in some district before the war. Starodub his name is, Ivan Ilyich Starodub. D'you know him? Didn't you ever meet him at the Regional Land Department? A tall fellow, dark, looks like an Armenian. I only saw him once at the district committee, but I heard a lot of things in his favour. People say that whenever he comes

to a farm he makes straight for some old woman's cottage, or the stock farms, or tramps out to the fields to chat with the brigades, and doesn't show up at the office until the evening, when he's through. Goes about by himself without any guides so's to get the proper hang of things. At the *Zirka* collective farm, they say, when he first came down there, one of the farm board members tacked onto him as guide and began showing him around, telling him how the seed material was stored, what trophies they had picked up, how many wounded horses they had doctored up, how many German carts they had repaired, and invited him to dine at his house, but Starodub mapped out his own route and wouldn't let himself be led about by the nose. He dropped in on one old woman—she had five sons in the army, two of 'em had military honours; the Germans hanged her old man for being a partisan, and burnt off the cottage roof—it was still only half covered, the ceiling leaked, there were pools of rain on the floor, it was damp and cold, no firewood in the house. Starodub made the guide himself cover the roof there and then. 'There's no need for you to hang onto my heels, comrade, wasting time. I'll find the barns and stables well enough without you. You stay here and mend this woman's cottage.' The fellow says: 'I'll send some men down tomorrow to patch up the roof.' And Starodub answers back: 'No,' he says, 'that's a long story. It's taken you six months to see to it, and it'll take you probably another six before you get it done. No, you do it yourself.' He didn't shout, they say, didn't use big words, but he gave that board member such a look and threw out a hint of what he could expect coming to him for such neglect of servicemen's families that the fellow was up on the roof in a jiffy. The brigade leader handed up the sheafs from below and the fellow did the thatching. And they carted up wood too. He had everybody thrown on their beam ends. They

had thought of showing off their achievements, treating the district representative as an honoured guest, spending a convivial evening and having a good chat with him—and here was he driving 'em up on the roof and out into the woods for firewood. . . . Lots of stories like this are related about him. He hasn't been two months on the job, yet there isn't a child or gaffer in the villages he's been to that doesn't know him. From what I've heard the man seems to have a real live human spark in him. He's not as well up in theoretical training as Serdyuk. He's an agronomist, like you, from the people. Started his career with illiteracy classes. Was a tractor brigade leader. When he reads a lecture or makes a speech and is on the subject of Frederick of Prussia or the Crusades he sends his audience to sleep, but when he gets on to local topics it's a scream—he makes some people sit up. He's not particularly eloquent as a speaker. Goes in more for practical matters, the problems of everyday life. That's not bad. There are no end of such problems waiting to be tackled. I don't see how you can ignore them. You might put professors at the head of the district administration but unless they keep their noses down to mother earth their activities wouldn't be worth a bean. But he's got the territory mapped out between him and Semyon Karpovich in such a way that he spends most of his time at the farms on the other side of the river. He hasn't been down to our place yet.

“Did you speak to Serdyuk about all this?” asked Petrenko.

“No, not in detail. I looked him up in town three times but he was always busy—crowds of people waiting to see him—and I didn't get a chance to talk to him privately. And before I left. . . .”

“Before you left you celebrated Romashenko's future Order with him.”

"Yes, I was a bit late. Didn't figure the time exactly. Nearly missed the train...."

"Let me tell you, Mikola," continued Spivak, "I was frankly very pleased to see all the old men back in their places. It was a jolly good idea, this preservation of the administrative personnel. Fedchenko is back on the District Executive Committee, Semyon Karpovich on the District Party Committee, Nikitchenko in the Land Department. They know their territory well, so they don't have to spend months finding their bearings. The district wasn't a single day without Soviet government after the Germans cleared out.... D'you know how they came back? They came with our troops, right after the forward line. There was a whole baggage train of 'em. At Krasny Farmstead they helped our engineers repair the bridges and make the crossing. As for Romashenko, he tore into his old M.T.S. on a tank together with a party of tommy-gunners.... Even Grandpa Butzik, the old E. C. groom, is back at his job, and the P. C. typist, you remember her, Nina Ignatyevna, with the same old typewriter. It was a good idea, you can't get away from it. But what isn't good is that some of them are going about their business exactly like they did before. It wasn't such a terrible thing in the old days if the first secretary of District Party Committee didn't personally visit a collective farm for two or three months—anyhow, the farm had it's own Party organization with a membership of from twenty to thirty of whom quite a few were active workers. But where's that membership now? At our farm only two out of thirty Communists remain. They're all at the front. The entire flower of the village is in the army. The one head that is left behind has to think for ten.... They'll manage the sowing all right, Mikola, I'm not afraid of that. They'll fulfill the plan, the one given them based on available draught power. I won't be

surprised if they overfulfilled it. There won't be so much fallow land as there was under the Germans. But there are different ways of sowing: You can sow to reap fifty poods per hectare, and you can do it to get a hundred or a hundred and twenty poods. One farm will complete the sowing on schedule, another will drag it on till harvesting time, and muff the works at the very outset. Our farm won't lag behind. Luka Gavrilovich will see to that. He'll give his own cab-horse to be harnessed to the plough and go about his rounds on foot, and think up contraptions to make an old tractor pull twenty harrows. But you know the kind of chairmen there are at some farms. Men newly promoted to the job during the war. They're still raw to the business and not well up in politics either. Got to be given a helping hand at every step. You can deliver the goods, Mikola, in different ways. You can get people back to a pre-war footing in ten years, and you can do it in three, the way Zavalishin intends tackling his cowhouse job!"

"D'you know what, Pavlo Grigorievich," said Petrenko, "how about writing Serdyuk a letter? You were at home but left without having had a chat with him—you can't leave it at that. It's not for me to teach you—a Party worker. Find time and write him what you've been telling me here. . . . Or if you like, we can write it together. What do you say, eh?"

Spivak pondered.

"All right. . . . But how are we going to say it? I'm not too good at putting my thoughts down on paper. There are certain expressions you can't use in a letter. Or perhaps we shouldn't pick too many holes? I respect, Semyon Karpovich, when all's said and done. I have him to thank for getting my Party schooling. He took me in hand and boosted me. He's my first tutor, my godfather in a sort of way. What I like about him is that he never makes long speeches and

doesn't wear people out at conferences till the early hours of morning—he always comes to the point at once without beating about the bush. He's got a head on his shoulders, the old man has, for all that he's a bit slow on the move."

"Yes, he is. . . ." said Petrenko, "that's the trouble."

"All right, then, let's write," said Spivak, warming to the idea. "It'll be a letter to fellow countrymen from comrades at the front. Let's write it like this: our district, Semyon Karpovich, is not a big one, it isn't particularly celebrated, Moscow didn't fire any salutes in its honour when it was liberated—but still, we men at the front would like to see it taking the lead in this new epoch of economic rehabilitation. How's that? It's our district, our home, isn't it? We hope that by the time we get back you will be able to treat us to meat pies made on white dough. Nobody's heart yearns so much for the ploughed fields and blossoming orchards as that of the soldier! Isn't that so, Zavalishin?"

Zavalishin was fully awake and listening to the conversation between the Captain and the B.C. with keen interest.

"Aye, Comrade Captain," he answered. "A soldier's heart is not made of stone. . . ."

Spivak consulted his watch once more.

"Exactly nought-nought. They'll soon begin."

He had barely completed the sentence when the first shells exploded on the other side of the village where the main regimental forces were launching their attack. The sound reached them several seconds after the explosion. It was still quiet. The shell bursts could be seen in swift silent flashes like distant streaks of summer lightning, while overhead, beneath the greying sky, the larks still trilled their song, and from the orchards fringing the village came the sleepy notes of the nightingale. Then the air suddenly became alive. The shells landed some four kilometres away. Owing to the

distance the ear was unable to distinguish the individual explosions which merged in a deep continuous roar.

Spivak, Petrenko and Zavalishin were instantly on their feet.

"Well, that'll do now," said Spivak. "We'll talk it over afterwards. Of course we should write. So we will."

The commander of the tommy-gunners' platoon, Lieutenant Dobrovolsky woke up and scrambled to his feet, swaying as if he were drunk. Stroking a shaven head wet with dew and not seeming yet to understand what was going on, he asked:

"What's that—the Germans? Who are they firing at? The Third Battalion?"

"Who said Germans," answered Petrenko, "it's the artillery offensive. . . . Pick up your cap before you get it trampled on."

Krapivka, the clerk, without raising his head from the ground, turned over on his side and chanted in a hoarse baritone: "Wake not the maiden at break of day. . . ." The signalman at the phone changed his position, stretching out a numb leg and drawing the other under him. Making himself more comfortable on his elbow he repeated monotonously into the receiver: "Acacia, hullo Acacia, guten morgen! Daisy calling. Daisy. Daisy! Checking the line. Checking the line! You deaf chump! . . ."

For fifteen minutes, as stipulated in combat orders, the artillery pounded away at the main enemy defences situated on the other side of the village. The Germans did not respond. At the end of the fifteen minutes, when the hurricane of fire had abated, the first German gun spoke up from the village. The shell burst far beyond the skyline—they were making the range of our batteries. Simultaneously three rockets shot high up into the sky from the spot where the Ger-

man shell had landed and came down in a sweeping arch, scattering red sparks over the steppe.

The B.C., short of stature, almost a head smaller than Spivak, and broad of shoulder, stood peering silently into the twilight gloom as if trying to determine from the swaying of the grass the exact position of his companies who were creeping now towards the village. Spivak, his fingers numb with cold, was undoing the tape of the tent-cape under his chin to throw it off. The cape, which had supplied little warmth during the night was now quite useless—Spivak always experienced a nervous shivering in battle, even when the weather was hot.

"Where are you off to?" Petrenko asked him.

"I'm going to Osadchi's outfit," answered Spivak.

All thoughts of home and the farm and Semyon Karpovich and the sowing campaign were dismissed from their minds.

War writers who have witnessed a battle from a safe distance sometimes describe a soldier's emotions in the following strain: "Between the successive bursts of machine-gun fire directed against the attacking line of the Nazis, he recalled a shady garden by the banks of the Dnieper, the Vladimir Hill in Kiev where he used to take a stroll with his girl, gazing at the soft sunset," and so forth. This is hardly true to life. The soldier in the battle line has sufficient time to let his thoughts dwell on the Dnieper and the shady garden under his sweetheart's window, but not when the enemy is advancing within a couple of hundred feet of him. Any soldier worthy of the name has only one thought during battle, a simple workday thought like that of a mechanic at his bench engrossed in some complicated job—how to do it. How to carry out combat orders, to destroy the enemy and keep alive himself. All his will and energies are concentrated

precisely on that object. He does not think of home when he rushes the German trenches swinging a grenade through the window of a dugout, not because he is unsentimental, but because he is just too busy. . . .

"Hadrn't you better wait a bit, Pavlo Grigorievich?" said Petrenko. "Perhaps Maznuk's outfit will need you more than Osadchi's."

"I'll go along and see how things are on the spot."

"All right, go ahead. . . . I'll be moving soon too. Haven't you an orderly with you? And not even a tommy-gun? Lieutenant Dobrovolsky! Let the Captain have a tommy-gunner."

It was growing lighter. Spivak and the tommy-gunner strode along the bottom of the depression at their full height. Coming up to level ground they crouched low and quickened their pace, then began running from one bush to another. Petrenko, peering before him at the outskirts of the village enfolded in what was either a mist or the smoke of conflagrations, listening to the firing and waiting for the runners to bring him the first reports from the attacking companies, now and then cast sidelong glances at the retreating figures of Spivak and the tommy-gunner until they had disappeared in the mist amid the tall weeds.

• III •

SPIVAK and his friend Petrenko had long since lost count of the battles they had taken part in in the course of the war. War is not a continuous round of attacks, even if there is an offensive afoot. It is not always one and the same division or regiment that cracks the enemy defences, storms and breaks the enemy's resistance and captures big villages and towns. It often happens that a neighbouring outfit on the right or left flank bears the brunt of the battle, attacks the enemy lines, drives wedges into it, confuses the enemy's plans, exposes them to the danger of encirclement, while the Germans, faced with a division advancing down the centre and the prospect of being caught in a trap, have no option but to call off the defence and withdraw as fast as they can. Here the attacking units advance rapidly in solid columns, like marching formations during manoeuvres, and their chief anxiety is to keep the enemy contacted and avoid the embarrassing situation of having no enemy in front of them.

Spivak and Petrenko too, sometimes for weeks at a stretch, underwent these endurance marches with short halts, coming across neither wrecked tanks, nor dead bodies on the road, seeing nothing save the traces of enemy occupation—smouldering fires and ruined villages. However, since their advance from the Volga, beginning with November 19, 1942, they had taken part in many a big battle. Spivak received one military decoration for Savur-Mogila and another

for Cherkassy. Petrenko received the Order of the Red Star for the Korsun-Shevchenko operation.

The Battle of Lipitsa began and ended like dozens of other battles before it. There was enough and to spare of confusion during the early hours preceding dawn before the heavy mist rising from the rain-drenched earth had dispersed. There were enough unforeseen contingencies and oversights and the mending thereof straightaway while the battle raged. Behind the enemy's main defences before the village, which had quickly crumpled up under the artillery barrage, the attacking infantry came upon two more lines of trenches. Pillboxes were encountered in the village almost at every street corner and tommy-gun ambushes lurked in gardens and orchards. Lipitsa—a large village and district centre—was defended by two German battalions of chasseurs who had had the tar whaled out of them in recent battles and lost a lot of manpower, but still retained sufficient fire power. They were supported by several medium tanks manoeuvring up and down the gardens from one end of the village to the other.

The din of battle on the eastern side was now punctuated by the grave unhurried speech of heavy machine guns followed by the magpie chatter of the tommy-guns—which meant that the enemy had been contacted. At the same instance Petrenko suddenly became aware of the sharp crackling of German machine guns in front of him, accompanied by the spitting of tommy-guns and the snap of hand grenades. Evidently the Germans had strong defensive positions here in their rear which his scouts had missed the night before. Their machine guns were firing from the trenches by the windmill on the common, from the big house on the right which he had orientated in the night and which now proved to be a two-storied flour mill, and from long brick-built barns on the left across the road.

Now that he could see and hear the enemy, Petrenko began directing operations in earnest. He issued new combat orders to the company commanders and mortar outfits and shifted the positions of his machine guns. During the early hours of the battle he remained at command post with the signalmen, runners and tommy-gunners, moving down the hollow towards the flour mill, and eventually he joined Lieutenant Maznuk's Fifth Company which commanded the main road running to the rear from the village, and there he remained until the end of the engagement. The Germans, as had been anticipated that morning after the sun had risen, failed to hold their positions in the centre and on the eastern side of the village and rushed through the orchards and streets to the western side. From that moment the brunt of the battle devolved on Petrenko's battalion. A squad of anti-tank riflemen was sent up to him from regimental reserves and artillerymen galloped up with two 45-mm. guns. The space between the flour mill on the right and the brick barns on the left with the road in the middle became the scene of fierce counterattacks by the German chasseurs....

They tried charging our lines full tilt in a mass. At the first impact the Germans scuttled for it in a panic-stricken mob, scattering about the orchards where they spent over half an hour rallying—one could hear the shouted commands of German officers and pistol shots. Psychic charges too were tried after a mortar barrage; then there were attacks undertaken suddenly without mortar fire, supported only by machine guns from the flour mill. There were tense moments during the battle when it might have seemed to an onlooker as though the Germans need only exert just a little extra pressure, attempt another spurt, to break through the line and make a dash for safety. At a critical moment when the Germans filed out of the orchards and gardens onto the

open square, one of our machine gunners would suddenly grow limp at his gun and his head drop lifeless to the ground while his cross-fire partner found his gun jammed. In the sudden silence the Germans could be seen bearing down at full height. Whether due to the gunner's curses or the furious glances the B.C. threw in his direction, the machine gun found its tongue at last and retrieved the situation.

Another critical moment was when the Germans sent four tanks across the orchards and down the street against Maznuk's Fifth Company. The thick hedgerows of the gardens afforded our men and guns excellent cover. The tanks came along without seeing them, slewing round their heavy turrets and blindly popping away with their big calibre machine guns, spattering tiny shells all around which exploded with an ear-splitting detonation. They were not heavy tanks and of a make our men had never seen before—evidently some obsolete Czech or Rumanian specimens—but still they were tanks. There was a time when four of these creatures against a battalion were more than sufficient to punch a gap in the lines.

Our men lay under cover with hand grenades ready. In a brief lull between the bursts of the heavy machine guns one of the men was heard shouting: "Hey, fellows, these ain't Panthers! They ain't Panthers!" Another voice answered the first: "What'yer tickled about? Kiss their bloomin . . . if they ain't!"

Our howitzers shot through one of the tanks at point-blank range, from a distance of fifty metres. It came to a stop by a straw-thatched barn, belching smoke and flames. The barn and a cottage caught fire. Amid the smoke that enveloped the courtyard it was impossible to see whether the crew had jumped out or had remained in the burning tank. The second tank, coming straight down the street, was blown

up by a moving mine suspended from a cable manipulated by two of our tank destroyers lying hidden in fox holes behind low brick walls on either side of the street. It stopped with a blown-off tread, and heeled over in the mud. The tank destroyers set it alight with several direct hits in the motor. The crew jumped out through the hatch but were promptly accounted for by our tommy-gunners and were left sprawling near the burning machine.

The other two tanks following behind veered sharply and scuttled back down the village. That was the last we saw of them. Abandoned by their crews, they were seized in perfect condition as trophies by one of the outfits on the right flank and credited to the combat account of the Third Battalion under Captain Solovyov, much to Petrenko's indignation. In fact, the usually cool, imperturbable Petrenko afterwards gave Captain Solovyov a piece of his mind at regimental headquarters and called him a "junk merchant". . . .

The men engaged in the Lipitsa action did not see the village until seven o'clock, when the mist had cleared. The village stretched for about four kilometres up the slope of a hill and could be seen from end to end, bathed in the warming rays of the morning sunshine, and buried in orchards and trees. The orchards were in blossom. The sun gilded the wet straw roofs of the cottages and sparkled in the puddles of the road. The trees were all wrapped in white blossoms as though powdered with snow. The poplars cast their lengthened shadows on the ground.

That morning no dog barked, no cock crowed in the village. Mortar and gun shells exploded in the courtyards, searing and tearing the branches of the trees with flying splinters. The inhabitants lay hidden in their cellars. There was no sign even of starlings, those happiest and jolliest of all spring birds and saucy mimics who had learned during the

war to imitate the whine of mortar shells and rattle of machine guns.

Here and there a cottage blazed, set alight by shells. Red tongues of flame shot up over the tops of the apple trees bedecked in white and pinky-white blossoms. The air was filled not with the homelike odour of dung and straw briquettes used in the makeshift summer stoves outdoors but with the acrid smell of conflagrations. . . .

There were many episodes in the fighting that would afford a theme of entertainment among the men till the end of the war, if they managed to survive it, or if other new impressions and new battles did not erase the memories of the old ones.

Tommy-gunner Petrusevich crawled ahead of his comrades into an empty barn which commanded a good firing position across the open street. Shooting out of a window below, he was unaware that a German tommy-gunner was sitting in the loft of the same barn.

This "double-edged" firing post was a source of mystification for quite a time. The ground floor was directing fire against the Germans, the top floor against our men. Nobody could make out whom it belonged to, until Petrusevich finally got an inkling as to the nature of his partner overhead by the sound of his gun.

Climbing onto a stump and tearing a hole in the brushwood unplastered ceiling while the German was preoccupied with his shooting, Petrusevich caught sight of the loft tenant and could think of nothing more felicitous than to seize the fellow by the leg. Perhaps the German's stock of ammunition had run out, or he was so scared out of his wits that he did not think of shooting at Petrusevich through the ceiling, or he had let go of his gun and it was out of his reach,—whatever it was, neither he nor his assailant opened fire. The

stump on which Petrusevich had stood to reach the ceiling toppled over when the German kicked out, and he now hung in mid-air, clutching the German's leg. So they both remained struggling until the battle was over.

Still green, but afire with ambition to open his fighting account, the young soldier was keen to tackle the enemy himself, bring him in as a prisoner, or, as a last resort, shoot him, but his tommy-gun dangled from his neck barrel down and it was impossible to get it levelled at the German without the risk of letting go of his leg.

It was not until the battle was over and the field kitchen rode into the village bringing to Petrusevich's nostrils the smell of burnt porridge, that the men outside heard an urgent voice issuing from the barn: "Hi, coo-o-ok! Leave a dole for Petrusevich! I'm in here! Boys, give us a hand, will you!"

Recalling the peculiar behaviour of the tommy-guns in that barn, the men rushed in and stopped short with amazement. Through a hole in the ceiling dangled a German leg in a wide funnel-shaped top-boot to which clung the spare little figure of Petrusevich, swinging to and fro like a pendulum, clutching the German's pants for fear of the boot slipping off, furious with discomfiture, his face battered and bleeding by the iron-shod boot and himself at the last gasp.

All that day and the next Petrusevich's hands trembled as though from contusion and he was unable to take proper aim with his tommy-gun. As for the German, when he was dragged down from the loft he toppled over like a sack and was handed over to the ambulance men.

Battalion Party organizer Rodionov, who had taken the place of a wounded machine gunner, was in a deserted cottage when a corner of the house came tumbling about his ears as the result of a shell hit. Rodionov, who was a man of gigantic stature and build, withstood the weight of the

debacle without serious injury and crawled from under the debris of brickwork, clay, logs and straw without assistance.

It appeared, however, that the owners of the cottage had concealed from the Germans in the loft, beneath a pile of hen feathers, a bucket of treacle, as thick and black as tar. As luck would have it, Rodionov received the contents of this bucket straight on his head. While he was struggling to free his arms from the debris the stuff trickled out to the last drop over his head and down his neck, saturating his tunic and shirt and reaching down even to the foot wrappings in his boots. He emerged from the ruins looking like a black-skinned African warrior, covered from head to foot in straw and feathers.

The men were convulsed with laughter at the sight of the Junior Lieutenant and even forgot the serious business of battle. The company commander advised him to withdraw. Swearing as only an Odessa longshoreman can swear, Rodionov withdrew to the rear reserves among the bushes, where the tommy-gunners, holding their sides with laughter, gave him a scraping down with Finnish knives.

Zavalishin bagged a German on his way to the B.C. with a message. How the fellow had managed to slip out of the village in that particular spot was inconceivable. Between the positions of the Fourth and Fifth Companies, on the edge of a large garden, there was a hedge of prickly acacia bushes, which grew so dense and bristled from top to bottom with such long thorns that it is doubtful whether a mouse could have slipped through. Yet the German somehow managed to do so. Zavalishin caught sight of him creeping among the tall weeds on the common. He fired several shots from his rifle and made the German get to his feet and hold up his hands. Then he disarmed him and brought him to the command post.

"Here you are! The Captain recently called me a sleep walker; here's something I picked up while out walking," Zavalishin declared with pride.

There was nothing ludicrous in the fact that Zavalishin had "picked up" a prisoner, it was the prisoner himself who was ludicrous. He was a puny little German with an adolescent figure, a bald head, a bespectacled nose and pugnaciously tucked up sleeves. The Germans are in the habit of going into action with their sleeves rolled up over their arms. Possibly they wish to imply that war with them is a matter of business, which they set about like butchers off to the slaughter-house in the morning. A stalwart soldier with rolled up sleeves does not present an extravagant spectacle; there is even something formidable about an attacking line of such butchers. But in the poor fish of a German Zavalishin had netted, this bellicose appearance was extremely droll.

Trembling with fear and casting timorous glances around, the German prodded himself in the chest, muttering: "*Ich bin Jäger, Jäger,*" trying to explain that he was not an officer, but a private, while the men stood around him guffawing at the comical sight he presented.

"Hey, you he-man, what'yer tuck yer sleeves up for? Out for a fist fight?"

"Wanted to start a psychic attack?"

Soldiers are fond of a good laugh. It was hardly the time and place for mirth, with shells ploughing up the ground and bullets whistling in the air and death shadowing every man. But a man can't think all the time of death, dammit!

The first-aid men had led and carried out no few casualties to the hollow where Petrenko had had his C.P. the night before and where a first-aid station was now rigged up. The green grass was strewn with blood-stained foot wrappings, torn shirts and bits of bandages. The walking wounded crowded round

the old well, lowering their canteens suspended by belts, greedily drinking the dirty musty water and giving their comrades lying on the ground a drink.

The sun was now high in the heavens and gave off a summer's heat. The drying earth was steamy. Fleecy little clouds hovered over the steppe close to the horizon.

The commander of the mess squad came riding up on a field kitchen with the cook, stopped by the well and began to pass out the food to the wounded men.

Petrenko was already in the village with the Fifth Company. He had detailed a platoon from each of the two companies and sent them with machine guns up the road with orders to dig themselves in on the crest of the hill, whence the Germans might attempt to get reinforcements through to their units bottled up in the village.

The issue was already decided. The Germans had failed to break out of the encirclement. The gardens and streets were strewn with dead bodies in green mud-spattered tunics. No more tanks put in an appearance. The firing was dying down. The only remaining point of resistance on this side of the village was the flour mill, in the section of the Fourth Company, where a group of heavy machine gunners was still putting up a stubborn fight.

Petrenko had not seen anything of Spivak since they had parted at dawn. He enquired about him several times of the runners coming up from the companies. Petrenko was in the Fifth himself, and nobody had seen the Captain in the Sixth Company with the mortar and artillery men.

Zavalishin reported to the battalion commander:

"I was down by the Fourth Company and saw him with Junior Lieutenant Osadchi when I captured Jerry, but that's the last I saw of him. . . . Are you worried about him, Comrade Senior Lieutenant? I should think so! A fellow-villager at the

front is as dear as a brother. And—both from the same farm too! It's fine to go through the war with a pal like that at your side . . . what wouldn't I give to have one in my company! Why, I'd even go into action in his place, I'd be that sorry for him."

Petrenko frowned and answered Zavalishin with a Ukrainian proverb:

"If dad's a labourer, being sorry won't help him. Ever heard that one?"

Spivak, however, was safe and sound. He had been all the time with the Fourth Company, which, as Osadchi had promised, had been first to break into the village. It had quickly cleared a street of the enemy but then had come under heavy machine and tommy-gun fire from the flour mill and been obliged to lie down.

One machine gun firing from under the roof of the mill was silenced by a well-aimed shell that ripped off half the roof. Two machine guns kept up a running fire from narrow embrasures on the second floor. Tommy-guns blazed away from the windows of both floors. There was an open space in front of the mill formed by a street and a big empty courtyard.

Judging by the fading sounds of firing in the centre of the village, whence only solitary rifle shots could be heard, the battle was drawing to a close. Here and there the enemy was being mopped up, weeded out of cellars, disarmed and taken prisoner. There remained only the flour mill. To have the artillery brought into play, with the company in the immediate vicinity and the village filled with our own troops, was too risky a proceeding. And apparently the enemy was not bent on surrendering.

Spivak lay side by side with Osadchi among the bushes across the road, behind the ruins of a brick barn, revolving

in his mind the speediest means of disposing of this last enemy refuge and getting a meal.

"They don't want to surrender. They don't want to go and rebuild our factories and pump our mines clear, the dirty swine," swore Spivak. "Seems we've got hold of a bunch of darned aristocrats. Well, we're not going to muck about with 'em till doomsday. Got to think of something.... We're not in luck today, Comrade Osadchi. The other fellows are probably cracking a trophy bottle while you and I are stuck here.... Why doesn't Petrenko at least send up a couple of anti-tank riflemen? Have we got any runners? Send him a note."

As Osadchi reached for notebook and pencil they heard a rustling in the grass behind them. Both turned their heads quickly and saw men with long-barrelled rifles in their hands crawling towards them. Petrenko had sent not two but eight armour destroyers.

"Comrade Captain," panted the sergeant who had crawled up first, "with your permission." He then addressed himself to the company commander. "Comrade Junior Lieutenant, reporting for orders. Four gun crews...."

"Okay" said Osadchi. "Got enough ammunition?"

"I wouldn't call it too much, about ten rounds each left. What shall we shoot at, Comrade Junior Lieutenant, the windows?"

"Yes.... But see you get the right window. They're hopping from one to another. And they've got embrasures at the corners.... Don't waste ammunition on the tommy-gunners, you put the machine guns out of action."

Those in the flour mill must have noticed the movement among the bushes by the barn ruins, for a jet of explosive bullets kicked the stones. Everybody ducked their heads. A small stone splinter painfully grazed Spivak's cheek. Someone among the line of crouching men emitted a loud snore.

like sound, rolled over on his side with legs thrown apart in an unnatural pose, and remained still.

"Wounded?" asked Spivak, sticking a poplar leaf he had picked up from the ground to his scratched cheek.

The man's neighbour crept up to the hit soldier, looked into his dimming eyes and put his ear to his chest.

"Killed."

The anti-tank riflemen crawled quietly to the positions the company commander had pointed out, and keeping a close watch on the mill, opened a deliberate fire on the dark hollows of the windows and embrasures at the first appearance of a machine-gun barrel.

At Spivak's side lay Senior Sergeant Razumovsky, commander of the third platoon, a handsome young man with black, girlishly arched brows and large dark wistful eyes,—in civil life an electrician from Kharkov.

When Spivak was removed to medical station last winter Razumovsky was still a private, a man who knew neither fear in battle nor fatigue on the march, and whom no one had ever heard utter a word of complaint about frontline hardships. He had come to the regiment from a partisan detachment that had been operating in the Kharkov Region until it was liberated by the Red Army, when the detachment joined the regulars. Before his transfer to the company Razumovsky had been in regimental reconnaissance and proved to be a splendid scout until it was discovered that there was no hope of his ever bringing in a live prisoner—there was always an accident with captives in the scout party of which he was a member, it transpiring that either the prisoner had begun to shout and had had his mouth gagged and himself throttled in the process, or a stray bullet had hit him from behind, and similar extraordinary accidents. He was too tough for a scout.

During the forcing of the Dnieper he took over voluntary command of the platoon when his Sergeant was killed. For battle exploits on the right bank of the Dnieper (in Spivak's absence), when Razumovsky killed nine German soldiers and two officers in a cottage in a single-handed grenade attack, he was awarded the Order of the Red Star, promoted to the rank of Senior Sergeant and appointed platoon commander.

Spivak remembered the intimate chats he had had on the march last winter with this taciturn, pensive, dark-browed youth. Ever since Spivak had begun getting letters from home following the liberation of the Poltava area, and had learned that his wife and children had managed to escape the Germans and were safe and sound, he felt embarrassed in Razumovsky's presence on account of his own good luck. Razumovsky's entire family had been killed during the bombing of Kharkov. He had nobody, not a soul in the whole wide world. He had lost his mother, his wife, his two sisters and his brother....

"Things have reached a turning point in the war, Comrade Captain," the silent Razumovsky had once confided his thoughts to the regimental agitator. "It looks as if the Germans are done for this time. But it doesn't ease the weight on my heart. It's heavier, if anything.... D'you know, Comrade Captain, I dread the day when they'll say the war is over and there'll be no more Germans to kill. What'll I do? My thoughts alone will drive me mad...."

All night as they marched along in column formation through the deep snow Spivak had spoken to Razumovsky about the sad fate of his numerous acquaintances and friends who had nevertheless borne up under their troubles and had found the courage to go on with life and make themselves useful in human society. He told him the story of a regimental surgeon who had served in Budyonny's army during

the Civil War and had twice during his lifetime lost his family. His first wife and two little children had been murdered by Makhno bands in his hometown in the Melitopol district back in 1920. His second wife and grown up daughter and son were killed in the first day of the war during a bombing raid in Lvov. And the surgeon, a white-haired old man at fifty, walked with his head up, firmly denied himself an extra glass at dinner, smoked no more than any ordinary smoker, performed difficult operations, cheered the wounded with his favourite saying: "You'll get over it before your wedding day, young man!" sent his medical friends in the rear long lists of books and periodicals that he wanted forwarded him to keep abreast of medical progress and even intended going back to his old experiments in painless childbirth when the war was over.

Razumovsky had then said to Spivak:

"If I get out of this alive I'll come down to your farm to live, Comrade Captain. Will you take me? It doesn't matter to me where I go to when the war's over. We'll build an electric station, and I'll work there as electrician. Or maybe I'll stay on for life in the army...."

Spivak looked at Razumovsky lying beside him after the latter had for the second time suggested storming the mill, and remembered that he had not yet congratulated him on his award. Drawing closer, he gripped his arm and shook it.

"What's that, Captain?" said Razumovsky interrogatively lifting his fine brows above his dark luminous eyes.

"My congratulations, Vasya, on account of the Star!"

"Thanks."

"Who's that?" asked Spivak, pointing to the body of the soldier who had remained lying in the line in the same pose in which death had overtaken him.

"Kostyuchenko."

"Kostyuchenko? Don't seem to remember him...."

"My countryman. From the Kharkov Region. He came to us when you were away. Recent replacements...."

"My brother's killed, Vasya," said Spivak, touching Razumovsky's arm again. "Got a notice when I was at home."

"Your brother? Where'd he get killed?"

"On the Zhitomir direction."

"Then that must have been recently?"

"Yes, this winter. He's been awarded posthumous honours."

Spivak related the circumstances of his brother's death.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

"And he was twenty-three. A year younger than you."

There was again a rustling sound behind. The commander of the anti-tank platoon crawled up on all fours.

"Comrade Junior Lieutenant, reporting for your orders!"

Petrenko had sent up howitzers too to shell the mill from the gardens with open sights. Probably Major Goryunov, regimental C.O., had phoned and made a fuss over the delay which prevented the results of the engagement from being summed up and reported to divisional C.O. The artillery men, however, had only anti-tank shells left.

"What's the use of sending 45-calibre armour shells through those walls! Now if we had shrapnel shells to pop through those windows where they'd explode inside.... I tell you what, Comrade Osadchi," said Spivak. "You stay here with two platoons and me and Razumovsky'll cut across the road under their music,"—he nodded towards the battery. Spivak caught sight of a soldier among the men of the third platoon with whom he had chatted the night before. "You're the agitator I appointed, aren't you? Comrade Andryukhin? That's good. Let's go and do a bit of agitating."

"D'you want to parley with 'em, Comrade Captain?" asked Osadchi.

"Yes. A friendly chat with pineapples. . . . What's the use of lying here? Let 'em lead us a dance until they run out of ammunition? We shan't avoid casualties anyhow. They'll pick us off one at a time. Let's cut across—we'll think up something when we get over. Meanwhile you set your wits to work here. When you see us get there raise your men and make a dash for the walls. The first floor's low down, you can jump straight into the windows. What do you say, Razumovsky?"

The latter nodded his head in silence and gave a curt command down the line of his platoon:

"Prepare for attack! Grenades ready!"

The command, which Spivak had so often heard and himself issued, always sent a nervous tremor through his body. He clenched his jaws to keep his teeth from chattering and said to the commander of the anti-tank platoon:

"Cease firing when we get across. Or better still, as soon as we get behind the mill send two or three shells into the second storey and then hang fire. Is that clear?"

Spivak knew that he was no coward, he remembered having experienced the same agitation and nervous tremor before addressing a crowded meeting of the collective farm, yet this peculiarity of his was extremely vexing. It seemed to him that all the men noticed how nervous he was. •

Osadchi issued the command to the first and second platoons:

"Prepare for attack!"

It was impossible to say whether there were five or ten or more tommy-gunners in the flour mill, because they shifted from place to place and fired through different windows. The Germans kept up a leisurely intermittent fire, shooting in short bursts, obviously economizing ammunition and endeavouring

to protract their last hour. While the artillerymen were preparing for action the anti-tank riflemen silenced the German machine gun by a direct hit in the embrasure.

Spivak lay thinking—now here was the most difficult moment in the battle—to get the men up from the ground for a frontal attack under a hail of enemy bullets. The space across the street was nothing much to speak of, no more than sixty metres, yet it would have been easier to tramp all the way from Moscow to Vladivostok than to sprint across that bit of ground. He had urged the agitators the previous night to seek words that would go straight to the men's hearts. What words could he use now himself to get these boys into action? Perhaps words were no longer necessary? The men had heard the command: "Prepane for attack!" Now they lay looking at their officers. Razumovsky was game enough to march up to the cannon's mouth if he knew there were sufficient Germans there to tackle. A good half of his men were tough soldiers, old acquaintances of Spivak's. They had heard him before. What could he tell them? That some of them would not live to see the sun and the sky several minutes hence? That one of them would be lucky enough to make the comparative safety of the mill walls where no bullets could reach him from above, while another would sink in the roadway clasping the earth? That chance would decide his fate, the same blind chance that sometimes deflects a bullet by a hairbreadth from a man's heart and rewards him with a new lease of life? They knew that without him. They also knew that they must get to grips with the Germans at all costs, because there was no other way of tackling an obdurate enemy. For such is war. The hardest was to close with the enemy in a hand-to-hand fight, a fight in which the Russian soldier has never been bettered by any adversary.

At the first sharp reports of the miniature anti-tank can-

non, Spivak, with a face faintly blanched, rose on his hands, glanced at Razumovsky and shouted:

"Come on, let's make a dash for it! For country, comrades!"

And bending his long body almost double he tore across the street at a speed he had probably never run since the race games of his early childhood, without looking back, hearing behind him through the shooting from the mill the thud of many heavy soldiers' boots, the panting of the running men and a string of oaths and curses someone was emitting with prayer-like fluency: "God damn Hitler the blasted maniac, and bible-backed Goebbels, and the whole lot of you stinking bunch of bastards, you parasites you!" The soldier contrived to run and curse in the same breath—obviously the cursing was a help at that difficult and dread moment.

Two men of the platoon failed to reach the mill. One was wounded and crawled to the shelter of a stone fence against which he crouched writhing with pain and began to rip off his shirt. The other lay motionless in the middle of the road, face downwards and arms outspread....

Behind the blank wall of the mill there proved to be no cover whatever—just a bare courtyard worn flat by carts. An opening had to be looked for at once. This was provided by a shell gap in the wall.

Throwing a grenade each into the aperture, Spivak and Razumovsky, followed by the men, rushed into a dark cellar littered with old iron, firewood and cases. Meanwhile Osadchi, on hearing the explosion of the hand grenades behind the mill, made a dash with his men for the main entrance. The battery ceased firing. A hand-to-hand fight commenced in the mill premises, on the staircase, in passages between the elevators and the winnowing rooms, in spaces so narrow that there was no room to swing a rifle butt. The fight was a brief but fierce one.

In big houses with a maze of rooms the men usually fight with exceptional ferocity, perhaps because they imagine traps everywhere, and a heightened sense of hazard lurking in every corner lashes them into a fury. It would be difficult to find a man who, at such times, when the enemy at the last minute throws down his gun and holds up his hands, will summon sufficient self-command not to run him through with his bayonet or bring the butt of his rifle down on the fellow's head with a bit of useless advice: "Should ha' done that before, you bastard! ..."

Was it essential for Spivak, a staff officer not attached to any outfit, to rush into the assault of the mill together with the men?

The Articles of War make no provision for a regimental agitator's place in battle. Some agitators in these circumstances are prone to take the hint from their immediate superiors. If their superior officer demands that they set a personal example, they will go into action, if not they will stay at the C.P.

Regimental C.O., Major Goryunov, who had seen many agitators in his outfit, required of Spivak nothing more than good lectures on the international situation for his line officers, to keep their brains from going stale with continuous marches and battles.

Spivak, however, was not a man of careful habits, neither at home nor at the front. Being himself of a turbulent disposition he did not place much reliance on other men's tolerance. Major Goryunov, who had threatened to take every wounded political worker to task for breach of discipline, might, in a different mood, as emphatically go upon another tack and come out with: "Was that the outfit where the regimental agitator was present that messed about with the Germans till evening?" Spivak was not a man to put up with such shafts, even in a jocular form. There was another reason why Spivak

joined in the assault of the mill, although he was under no compulsion to do so. Every time he returned to the front from hospital (this was the fourth time he had been wounded) he liked to test himself out in the very first battle to see whether his nerves were still strong, whether he had not lost the grit acquired in previous battles, and whether the German bullets seemed any more dreadful now that the war was drawing to its close. That day's test of nerves had, on the whole, satisfied him. He had experienced the usual trembling before the plunge, but once in the mill he was master of himself and fought coolly.

A count of the German dead in the mill showed that there had been twenty of them, including a captain, three lieutenants and four noncoms. Joint reminiscences after the assault established a fairly true and undisputed picture of the fray, each man receiving due recognition for the number of Germans bayoneted and shot, including the lieutenants. Osadchi accounted for one lieutenant, the agitator Andryukhin for another, while the third, who had put up a furious resistance and wounded three of our men, was bayoneted by squad leader Krizhni and private Abrosimov. The Captain was accounted for by no one.

Spivak had dashed into the mill premises armed only with a pistol loaded with a charge of nine bullets. "Fathead, might have been paying a visit on my mother-in-law!" he reviled himself afterwards. In fact he never carried a tommy-gun—a foolhardiness that was peculiar to many political workers who held the belief that their principal weapon in battle was the spoken word.

The German Captain with three of his men had crouched behind a heavy machine gun on the second floor. Spivak had emptied his pistol at the German tommy-gunners on the ground floor, after which he started laying about him with an iron rod that he had picked up in the engine room. In mounting the rickety staircase to the second floor he stumbled on the

top step and negotiated the stairs, bruising himself painfully as he hit the hard cemented floor. When he clambered up the stairs again he found Osadchi, Razumovsky and Andryukhin with the rest of the men officiating there.

He came on the scene just as the German Captain sprang away from his machine gun that had got stuck in the embrasure, jumped onto the window-sill and, firing at his attackers with his pistol, wounded Razumovsky with two bullets. Osadchi's emptied pistol dangled from its cord at his hip, and his tommy-gun refused to answer the trigger. Andryukhin discovered an emergency exit leading downstairs where he knocked into three Germans, one of whom he shot pointblank and the other two of whom he came to grips with.

Spivak hurled his rod at the Captain from the doorway, but missed. The German levelled his pistol at Spivak, who jumped aside and crouched down, but, changing his mind, evidently in doubt as to the number of bullets he had expended, the German thrust the muzzle of his pistol into his mouth and without hesitation pulled the trigger. That was the last shot fired in the mill. The rest of the enemy were bayonneted....

Andryukhin kicked the bodies of the Germans he had killed down the stairs, and rushed upstairs again with his rifle atilt, staring about him wild-eyed. Finding no more Germans to bayonet, he pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket, dipped it in the pool of blood round the body of Razumovsky who lay face downward, wounded in the chest and stomach, and, sticking it on his bayonet, thrust his rifle out of the window, and waved his improvised red flag as a signal that the mill had fallen....

Spivak, grimy, perspiring, limping with the pain in his bruised knee and knocked up as though he had been haymaking

all day, met Petrenko outside a little cottage which Krapivka the clerk had fixed upon for battalion headquarters, though there was nothing to distinguish it from the other houses around, and where the signalmen were already busy getting the wire down. They had parted the previous night without saying good-bye. Now they embraced each other at meeting.

"Why are you limping?" asked Petrenko. "Are you wounded? Want to go back to hospital? What's the good of that? Just come out of the hospital and now back again?"

"No, I'm not wounded," Spivak reassured his friend. "I hurt my leg. There's no need of a doctor—just a slight bruise and a little bump. Nothing much. It'll heal itself. You'd better send a doctor to Razumovsky."

"What's the matter with him?"

"He's badly wounded. We left him at the mill, on the second floor. The boys are giving him first aid."

Petrenko dispatched a runner to the battalion first-aid station for a doctor, with the command:

"As fast as your legs will carry you! Tell him to come in to see me afterwards and report how Razumovsky's getting on."

"I'm as hungry as a dog, Mikola," said Spivak taking stock of his surroundings, "but not for porridge. Are you fixed up already? Where's the billet? Is the mistress at home? Did you speak to the Major? Does it smell of borshch with sour cream around here? Are we going to stay here long?"

"With your permission, Comrade Captain!" said Krapivka the clerk, coming up to the officers and stopping within three feet of them. Krapivka, an elderly game-looking Sergeant with a streak of grey in his hair and moustache, who was as tough and hardened as three wars could make a man, acted as the battalion's permanent billeter and negotiator with house mistresses. "It certainly does smell of borshch! We can take it easy till twenty-three o'clock. The missus has been discov-

ered in the cold cellar. I'm not so sure about the sour cream—they say the cow has been let out to stray in the woods out of harm's reach, but we'll do the trick with an egg. And there'll be fresh veal chops for a second course. The neighbour's young bull was killed by a piece of shrapnel—I freezed onto a hind leg with a bit of sirloin. Can you wait fifteen minutes, Comrade Captain? It's the regular time to get a customer's order attended to, like in the North Pole Restaurant at Krasnodar on Gogol Street in peace time. It's sizzling already in the pot."

"Fifteen minutes, you say? Okay!" said Spivak, glancing at his watch. He told Petrenko how they captured the mill and then began plying his friend with questions. "Well, and how was it in the other companies—pretty hot? They didn't get through, did they? So you were up against the tanks? Didn't Goryunov say how many there were of them here—a regiment or less?"

"No, he didn't. There were a hell of a lot of 'em. I guess there must have been two battalions. They didn't break through our positions. One of 'em nearly slipped away, but Zavalishin nabbed him."

"Did he? Oh yes, he mentioned it. A little fellow in spectacles, wasn't it? That's fine! Is the wire in? I'll ring up the editor of the divisional sheet and tell him—only one little guy seeped through and he was caught. Who was it blew up a tank with a mine in the Fifth Company? D'you know their names? Got to see that they're put on the commendation list today. Andryukhin too, the agitator—he killed a lieutenant and three privates at the mill. Well, where are your headquarters? In this cottage? Krapivka! Eleven minutes gone. Will you manage in four? Mind you make it on schedule, like we arranged. How about a thimbleful? Fine! Let's go in."

After the battle there were the usual scenes of activity. The starlings reappeared in the trees and on the roofs, the larks could be heard singing in the blue sky—they had prob-

ably been singing unheard high in the air during the heat of the battle. The soldiers were digging themselves in on the common beyond the village. A squadron of dive bombers in flight formation like a flock of cranes droned its way westward and, disappearing beyond the horizon, unloaded somewhere far over the German rear—the explosions of the bombs could be heard in a distant rumble, and now and then a shell came whining over from some far-off battery.

The Germans were shelling the village in a desultory haphazard manner. One shell landed far beyond the village on the left, and ten minutes later another shell exploded among the dense apple trees on the right, blowing the blossoms off the trees and leaving gaping holes in the orchards.

But nobody paid any attention to these sporadic explosions. The villagers, old men, barefooted urchins and women in embroidered blouses appeared in the yards and streets. The soldiers carried the bodies of the dead to the village square and laid them out in a row on the grass where other men were digging a grave.

The battalion had lost eleven men in the Lipitsa fighting, not counting the wounded who had been removed to the rear on the trucks that had been bringing up the shells. Sergeant Andrei Bolotnikov, a former milling machine operator at the Stalingrad Tractor Plant, and one of the few native Stalingrad men remaining in the battalion, was killed during the skirmish at the windmill. Ashot Akopyan, order-bearer, an Armenian textile worker from Yerevan and the regiment's best sniper, also met his death in this remote Ukrainian village by the Carpathians. He had had a score of a hundred and five shot Nazis during his three years of honourable service to his country. Junior Lieutenant Arkhipov, commander of an anti-tank platoon and formerly a steel smelter from the Donbas, was killed by a direct hit from a mortar shell. His body was

picked up in fragments. A blood-sodden Party card containing the addresses of his mother and wife and his identification papers were found in the pocket of his shredded tunic. The documents left no doubt that it was precisely Arkhipov whose remains the first-aid men had picked up, but as another man, machine gunner Maximenko, a former combine operator from Stavropol had been blown to pieces by a shell within a few paces, the ambulance men collecting what remained of the two men on stretchers were not sure whether the arms and legs they had laid with the trunk of Lieutenant Arkhipov were really his and not private Maximenko's.

The graves of soldiers who have died fighting for their country are called common graves. No man buried there would frown on the ambulance men for mixing his blood with the blood of a comrade lying by his side in a last brotherly embrace.

A direct hit is a ghastly thing. It is rare that documents at least can be salvaged. Sometimes a bursting shell will leave nothing around save splashes of blood on the grass and bits of flesh and bones bearing no resemblance whatever to a human body. The surviving comrades begin to rack their brains as to whether it was Trofimov who had been lying there or not. No, it wasn't Trofimov, he had gone out with a scout party and hadn't come back yet. Maybe it's Kravchenko? Kravchenko had been sent to C.P., with a report. Had he come back? Nobody had seen him come back. If he had, maybe this was him. Perhaps a stray bullet had got him and he was lying somewhere out in the steppe among the weeds where even the local villagers wouldn't find him so soon? If so, then this was some other fellow. Neither was Nikitin found among the dead or wounded. A man is missing. He was lying there, where the shell landed, there's his blood, but none of his comrades could vouch for his identity.

And so a "reported missing" notice is sent to a man's

home, or to two or three men's homes. A mother will read and reread the notification for the hundredth time, ask old soldiers what it means when a man is reported missing at the front; she will speculate—perhaps he has been taken prisoner, perhaps he has been picked up wounded by another outfit, she will ask every man coming home from the front and from Germany when the war is over whether he has seen her son. She will wait for him as long as she lives and no man can say to her: "Don't wait, mother, I buried him myself...."

Eleven dead were picked up on the field of battle. And while they were being borne to their burial place on the village square the twelfth one died in a car that was bearing him swiftly to the rear. This twelfth one was Senior Sergeant Razumovsky. He died without regaining consciousness, which he had lost when he fell bleeding on the muddy floor of the flour mill.

Three soldiers were digging the grave.

"Shall we take off a little more?" one of them enquired, wiping a sweating brow with his shirt sleeve and measuring the depth with the long handle of his sapper spade.

"Go on digging," returned another. "They're going to lie here a long time. They won't be carried home. Let's make a good job of it."

A group of soldiers were coming down from battalion headquarters—a platoon of tommy-gunners to fire a salute to the dead—followed by a group of officers.

"Let's take off another layer and that'll do. They're coming here."

The earth was damp and lower down still retained the deathly chill of winter. The clods thrown out reeked in the warmth of the sun like smoking dung.

"Steaming," said one of the grave-diggers, a young peasant lad from a Saratov collective farm. "It's spring." And hearing the near whine of a shell he ducked instinctively and

shouted: "Lie down!" though he stood in a deep hole the top of which reached above his head.

The shell landed on the square within a hundred metres of where the men were digging. A big splinter flew with a fluttering noise over their heads like a flushed partridge and landed with a smack near the grave.

"Blimey, that was a near one. A close shave!"

"A close shave ain't a hit."

"If it'd been a couple of feet closer it would ha' got us."

"It didn't have no punch in it, it just dropped like a stone. Would only have raised a bruise."

"Yea, if that had hit you on the nob you'd ha' stayed in this here hole for company with that bruise of yours...."

The young soldier, having finished off his corner, clambered out of the pit and looked at the spot where the shell had burst. A wisp of smoke hung over the crater, or perhaps it was vapour from the upturned earth.

"The earth's steaming, I tell you," he repeated. "It's spring. Funny sort of spring in this part of the world. At home the snow thaws a week beforehand, the water runs off, the ground dries and warms up so that you can walk on it barefooted, whereas here it was cold as hell last night. People plough and sow, yet the earth's like ice down below. I suppose the cold comes from the Carpathians—they're not far from here. The orchards, though, are not frozen; I tried the blossoms—they don't come off. The folks hereabouts go in for apple trees," he said, taking in the orchards round him. "People in other places grow cherries and apricots, and here every blessed house has apple trees. Must be good growers, I guess. Some folks say that after a cold late winter like this there's a good harvest of all crops—corn and vegetables. Mind you, other folks say just the opposite—early spring's supposed to mean a good harvest.... As for the girls round here, though they

lived less than two years under the Soviet government before the Germans came, they seem to take a tumble for us Red Army fellows. They talk the same's our Ukrainian lasses. I struck up an acquaintance with one of 'em—there's her cottage down by that barn. I helped her lug her junk out o' the cellar back to the cottage. Invited me down this evening for curd dumplings.... Oh, hell!" he suddenly ejaculated with a groan. "It's pretty rotten to die in spring! Cursed Hitler, why didn't you peg out like a dog when you were a little un and your German bitch of a mother fed you out of a spoon! Who sent you down on our heads, you damned monster!"

After the burial of the dead, the usual simple soldier's rite, without tears and lamentations and wailing women, when the battalion commander had spoken a few words over the bodies laid out in the grave: "Farewell, comrades! Your country will not forget you!" and a volley had been fired from ten tommy-guns, and swift-moving spades had formed a fresh mound with a plywood tablet with the names of the buried, Spivak visited the company of the men who were digging trenches.

No one knew how long they would stay in the village. The regimental commander's provisional order had been—relaxation till 23.00. Our reconnaissance party was on duty somewhere outside the village with a reserve outfit that had not taken part in the night fighting and had been sent forward by divisional C.O. If it became known that the enemy was continuing to retreat our men would take off earlier, as had often happened before. Even though the halt was for half a day or even an hour, the command just the same was for everyone to dig in, including machine gunners and tank destroyers.

Only the Fifth Company was in luck. The defensive position assigned them by the B.C. on the common outside the village

contained a deep ditch, probably an old field boundary, half filled with silt and sand. The men were not long in digging cavities in the ditch wall for gun nests. The observation men stood at their posts while the rest relaxed, some sleeping in the blazing sun with tired legs and arms sprawled in an attitude that made them look like revellers the morning after the night before, snoring so loudly that the larks alighting nearby were startled up into the air again; others sat on the edge of the ditch in their underwear or in nothing at all, engaged in mending their trousers or shirts, or cleaning their guns.

In one of the platoons the agitator, that same sniper Spivak had taken a liking to, was chatting casually with the men, summing up the results of the engagement. He had no official information on that score. Regimental headquarters had not yet made up its report of casualties and trophies. All that was known was that the Germans were two chasseur battalions short and another big village behind the advancing regiment had been liberated from the Nazis. During the fighting the village had looked as if it was uninhabited, but now it was coming to life before their eyes. Women were driving cows and goats down the streets, the house chimneys began to send up smoke from lit stoves and the children brought jugs of water and milk to the soldiers in the trenches. That was what the sniper was talking about to his comrades as he cleaned the lock of his rifle.

"An offensive's a good thing, boys. It was a bitter pill retreating, but advancing is ever so much jollier. We grow stronger with every kilometre, while the enemy is getting weaker. This was all ours, you know." His eyes travelled over the steppe, the orchards and the village. "Yes, it was ours, and the enemy had it all. He seized people's bread and cattle to feed his army and shipped trainloads of foodstuffs to Germany. Well, we've got it back again now. . . . We've made at least

ten kilometres since last night and the division must have covered as much along the front. Ten by ten—that makes a hundred square kilometres of territory cleared of the enemy. That's a single division! What about the whole army? What about the whole front? Every kilometre's a treasure. Look at those winter crops growing green—that's going to be grain. There's the telegraph poles and the wiring—it's all national property. Look at that flour mill—it's had a bit of a rough time with the shells, but never mind, they'll get it patched up. To build a new one like that would work out dearer. Somewhere else along these here kilometres there are factories and towns and railways. If you were to count it all up you'd find we're richer overnight by hundreds of millions, I daresay billions. And look at the reinforcements we're getting in men! The Germans couldn't have driven everybody off to Germany. There are young fellows of draft age among the people who hid from the Germans. I've seen boys of my age who'll no doubt be called up tomorrow. There are enough men here to form another division of soldiers. That's the idea in advancing. Our strength grows despite battles and casualties and bloodshed."

In another platoon a soldier was passing on to his comrades the stories related by the villagers who had lived under the German heel. There was nothing new in these stories—the usual German atrocities committed all over the Ukraine wherever our men had passed—but the soldier related them word for word as he had heard them told probably by some old woman or soldier's young wife in the village (women are better at describing these dreadful scenes), with all the details that had shaken him when he first heard them.

Spivak stood apart listening to him for a long time. The soldier described how the chasseurs whom they had made short work of that day had first come into the village in March, during the severe frosts and snowstorms, how they had driven

every single one of the inhabitants out of their homes into the ravine, had made themselves at home in their houses and made free with their corn bins and coffers.

The people were told that they were being expelled from the village because of the necessity of housing a big garrison. The same thing was happening in the neighbouring villages. Everywhere arriving troops were being billeted and the people were evicted and not even allowed in to warm themselves. They spent ten days in the bare steppe out in the snow and frost, seeking shelter from the snowstorms in the sand-pits.

Outside the village stood a lonely half-demolished cottage that the Germans hadn't occupied. The hut had belonged to a lone old man who died in the autumn. The women with children and babies brought their little ones here every night and took turns in staying with them, for there was no room to accommodate all the mothers. They heated the stove with weeds gathered in the steppe to keep the children warm.

The Germans, seeing that people were using the cottage as a refuge from the cold, burnt it down. The decrepit old shanty burned a long time—three days. And those three days the children tried to keep warm by huddling round the smouldering fire. After that, when several people froze to death and the village elder, who had been turned out with the rest of the people, pleaded with some chief, permission was graciously granted them to move into their cold cellars—they were not allowed within ten paces of their cottages. And there they lived till this morning.

"I started fighting in these parts," the soldier went on. "I was in the army on frontier service when the war broke out. Retreated in '41. I felt awfully cut up about these people. We'd liberated 'em from the Polish landowners, given 'em the land, teased 'em with a brief flash of happiness, a breath of freedom, and then left 'em to the mercy of the Germans...."

He related many more frightful and humorous stories about the German landowner—the “Sonder-Führer,” or simply the “Zounder,” as the people called him—who had lived in the village and decamped to Germany when the Red Army crossed the Dnieper; how the old squirarchal order of life was gradually restored, how at first the village elder appointed people at his own discretion for field work and house jobs for the German masters, his choice generally falling on bitter-tongued soldiers’ wives he conceived a dislike to or peasant men who did not doff their caps on meeting him, and how he had then made it known at a village meeting that every adult person—men up to sixty and women up to fifty-five years of age—was obliged to work off two days a week for squire “Zounder’s” benefit. People worked on the German’s estate under the whip of police overseers from morning till night, neglecting their homes and children and receiving for their labour scrips issued by the bailiff. In what way the squire intended to honour these bonds people never found out, because the German made off without completing the harvesting. He described how people built a bathing hut for the German’s “Frau,” and how the girls once hid that lady’s clothing in the bushes and she ran home naked, furious and swearing in Russian: “Damn!—you! Bolshevik! Blast you!” Ever since then, when the fat lady, who couldn’t stand the broiling heat, took a dip in the river, both her person and her clothes were closely guarded by two tommy-gunners strutting on the bank.

“Comrade, you’re not an agitator, are you?” Spivak asked. “I didn’t appoint you, I think?”

“No, Comrade Captain, what sort of an agitator am I?” answered the soldier. “I never went in for that kind o’ thing. I’m uneducated, only attended school two winters. I can just make out printed writing. Worked as fueller on a State Farm

before I was called up. I like listening to a good lecture, but I've never spoken in public in my life. On the first of May the farm manager tried to talk me into making a speech. 'Go on, Gaponenko, say something at the meeting about the way the tractor brigades should be catered to.' 'Good Lor', no' I says. 'Why the whole village'll be there and everyone'll look at me when I'll climb onto the platform. I'd feel like crawling into a hole and pulling the hole in after me. And my wife standing somewhere at the back feeling tickled to death and probably jeering—come on, Timokha, let's hear something about world politics! Oh no,' says I, 'that's not in my line, I'm a dud when it comes to politics. Better let my wife put in a word for the milkmaids; she's better educated than me, she finished five classes, and I don't know half the words she's learned. She's always got the laugh on me. Once she popped a question like this: 'I say, Timokha, what's the meaning of the word "gesticulation" I came across in the newspaper?' I'm damned if I knew what it meant and I didn't know what to answer her. 'Gesticulation,' I says, 'er . . . gesticulation—that's a kind of a joke you know, something funny.' 'Funny yourself!' she says. 'You don't know! It's when you and me are coming home from the club late in the evening and you get wild and begin to wave your hands about—that's what gesticulation means. Come off it, don't put on swank,' she says. 'No,' I says, 'I can't make no speech while she's here. If I'd use a word in the wrong place I'd never hear the end of it at home.' No, nothing doing. I'm no good as an agitator, Comrade Captain. I ain't politically polished up."

"Never mind," said Spivak with a smile, "your wife's not around and there's nothing to put you out. What did you say your name was? Gaponenko? Well, Comrade Gaponenko, take this commission from me. Whenever you come to a village, find out what sort of place it is, what kind of people live

there, how many lived there before, how many are left, and what they went through under the Germans and tell your comrades all about it. Just like you were doing now. No gesticulation about it. D'you get me?" He put his hand on the man's shoulder. "You have the knack of it, like a good scout—not to look much but to see plenty. And your nerves are not blunted. You just go about telling your comrades what you see and hear, so that after the war they'll have something to remember besides the rivers they forced, the places where they were treated to borshch and how many times they were lucky enough to get a taste of chicken meat. Men get that way sometimes, you know. Now, I had an uncle who was a sailor in the Baltic fleet in the old days, before the Revolution. Their ships were sent off to the Far East, from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific. He cruised half the globe on those ships, went all round Europe, through the Mediterranean, was in Africa and spent a month in some port in India undergoing repairs after weathering a storm. Hearing all the places my uncle visited I asked him: 'Tell me, Uncle Petro, what did you see in foreign countries?' He thought hard and long, but couldn't remember having seen anything. All he did remember was how some drunken French sailors in Marseilles kicked him out of a pub and his Number Ones were in such a state that he came back on board his ship in his underpants...."

Spivak listened to another agitator chatting with the men in Lieutenant Belov's company. Spivak had advised his men to remind the young draftees more often about the division's battle record and the Stalingrad traditions.

This particular talk, the beginning of which he had missed, was about Stalingrad, as to what was going on there and what the city would look like when it rose from the ruins after the war was over. Squad leader Sergeant Fomin, an Order-bearer and participator in the Stalingrad defence, a Si-

berian by birth, and formerly an Irkutsk builder's fitter, was doing the talking in his capacity of agitator.

"I don't know," he was saying, "I wasn't there since '42, and didn't see what was going on there. I wouldn't mind having a peep though. I've an idea it's going to be a wonderful place. A city of cities.... We've got a lake in Siberia, comrades—people call it a sea—Lake Baikal. It's that kind of a lake that when you sail on it in a ship or in a boat you'd feel ashamed to throw a fag-end into the water, it's that clean and beautiful. About a hundred feet from the shore you can see every stone and shell at the bottom. Well, it strikes me that in Stalingrad too not even the most careless person would dare to spit on the sidewalk. Every bit of earth there has been washed with our blood. Monuments will be put up there all over the city: 'Here guardsmen so-and-so fought to the death,' 'Here three heroes fought a whole company so long as their eyes could see the sights and hands hold their machine guns.' Stalingrad's the place where something tremendous happened in our lives. Not all of us came to Stalingrad good soldiers and good men. But those who survived it and went on fighting after it, did so with a new heart, as new men.... Maybe the tide of war turned just there and not anywhere else because the city bears the name of Stalin, and we knew that if we gave it up to the enemy we would be losing the dearest thing that we and all the toilers of the world possessed."

"Allow me to ask a question, Comrade Sergeant," said one of the men with a faint sneer, rising on his elbow. He had been listening to Fomin with half-closed eyes, but with an alert expression on his face. "May I? I wasn't at Stalingrad, I haven't the honour of wearing a medal like your's—it's a pity—but I read something about the defence of Stalingrad. There's no gainsaying—our men there really fought heroically, but it seems to me, Comrade Sergeant, that you're exag-

gerating a bit about our rebirth. What exactly do you mean in saying that we've become different men after Stalingrad? What have we become, Soviet men? Then what were we before, weren't we Soviet men? Or maybe the other way round—we were Soviet men then and now we're not? I think you've got it a little mixed up there, Comrade Sergeant. That point's not quite clear to me, excuse me for saying so."

"Not quite clear?" Fomin said thoughtfully, turning towards the man who had interrupted him. "I'll try to explain, Comrade Karzhenevsky. I'm not talking about rebirth. Simply, we've been furbished up a bit. We've gained something new and cast off something we could do without.... Do you, Comrade Karzhenevsky, consider yourself to be a Soviet man?" Fomin asked the soldier pointblank, pursuing a train of thought that had apparently occurred to him during the talk.

"It's not for me to say," retorted the soldier with a shrug and the same faint sneer. "I've been living twenty-four years under the Soviet government. My father was a Red partisan in the old days, my brother was killed in 1918...."

"All right, then you're a Soviet man, I take it? Personally I don't think you're a former kulak or a proprietor—though one does come across them now and then.... Have you been long in the army? Since Vinnitsa was taken? Not long ago then. Probably in a reserve outfit before this, eh? Only two months in the front line? Well, you haven't had the toughening that we've had. What did you do today, Karzhenevsky, when one of the tanks bore down on us? You crouched at the bottom of the trench. Didn't you hear me shouting: 'Karzhenevsky—hand grenade!' Why didn't you throw a grenade? You had some on you, didn't you? Yes, you did. Did think the gunners would do the job for you, or were you in a funk? You let the enemy through—go ahead, run off to Germany, muster your strength again (Spivak was listening to an expression of

his own thought) and come back to us in twenty years' time to burn and shoot and hang. You saw where the tank was heading, didn't you? Straight for Mikhailyuk and Popov. Why didn't you get up? You were the end man and could have stopped the tank, instead of which you let it go through. Well, you see how it works out. And you consider yourself a Soviet person, don't you? That sort of thing didn't happen at Stalingrad, Karzhenevsky. It was the iron rule of the guardsmen—die, but help a comrade. We paid for it over there with our blood. For all the meanness that still remained in people like you. We see the world and men now with other eyes."

Spivak had nothing to add to the Sergeant's words—so much did they have in common with his own thoughts and feelings nurtured during his many months of life at the front, thoughts that he found himself frequently dwelling on lately, now that the air was full of the promise of a speedy end to the war. Spivak listened to Fomin with a warm kindly feeling for the young Sergeant whose thoughts were as intrepid as his conduct in battle (Fomin had merely got up at the Captain's approach and saluted him, and had then resumed what he was saying without turning his head, evidently in a hurry to finish what he had started). He observed the rapt interest with which the men were following the Sergeant's agitated speech, and he thought to himself: "I don't think I've done so bad today with the agitators. If only they'd live long enough. . . ."

Waiting until the Sergeant had finished, Spivak added a few words to what he had said about Stalingrad:

"I also think it's going to be a wonderful city. When it'll be rebuilt and people will settle down to live in it there'll probably be fewer knaves there and hogs and insiders and others of that kidney than anywhere else. But I think there'll be less of that riffraff now everywhere. . . . Karzhenevsky too will

understand how men become better in war," added Spivak after a moment's pause, addressing the soldier whom Fomin had accused of cowardice. "Eh? What d'you say, Karzhenevsky?"

The man answered nothing. The sneer was gone from his lips. It was difficult to guess from that face that had gone a shade paler, and from the downcast eyes, what exactly he was thinking, and what sort of a fellow he was, this man who, like so many millions of other men, had put on an army cap with the red star in front and a soldier's shirt.

"I think you'll understand, eh?"

"That's not the first time it's happened with him, Comrade Captain," grunted another soldier sitting beside Karzhenevsky. "He's let us down before this. The other day when we were fighting to capture the farmstead he was sent to fetch a supply of cartridges and it took him half a day to do it. Says he couldn't find the ammunition dump, the liar. Must have sneaked away to some trench."

The men raised a clamour:

"He went with me on guard duty, and I told him to take along some extra grenades, and he said: 'We won't need 'em; in case of anything we'll fire a shot as warning and hop it. That's what the Rules say,' he says. He knows his Rules, all right! Fire and hop it!"

"And to me he said: 'You're a fool, Mukhin—must you go all out? What made you volunteer to go scouting? Don't we lay ourselves open to enough risks when we're ordered to without meeting 'em halfway'?"

"None of the boys want to have him as ration partner—he measures the bread by the millimetre."

"All he knows is to go prowling about the houses. The other day when we were billeted at some woman's house at the farmstead he tore up her bed sheet to make himself foot wrappings with. He helps himself to everything like a darned

Fritz—you feel ashamed to be seen in people's cottages with him."

"If he'd only have as much bravery as he has brass."

"He'll understand," repeated Spivak. "By the time we get to Berlin Karzhenevsky will have the chance to become thrice Hero of the Soviet Union. But only up to Berlin. When the war's over that'll be the end. He'll go home the man he is. If he's got a conscience, he'll remember Mikhailyuk and Popov many a time. . . . Or he may not get home at all," suddenly wound up Spivak in a voice that sounded hard and alien. "Today the whole battalion made a fine showing. Ten men have been mentioned in dispatches for the commendation list. Karzhenevsky alone has spoilt the show from what I hear about him. If he goes on fighting that way, trying to wriggle out of his duty, his own comrade or officer will give him a dose of lead during the battle. And we'll only say—good riddance. There'll be one rotter less after the war."

Barely able to stand on his feet with fatigue after a sleepless night—but one of a series of such nights since he rejoined the regiment—and the pain in his swollen knee, Spivak nevertheless gathered all the agitators for an hour's chat at the Fifth Company, which occupied a central position in the battalion's disposition. Here, beyond a ditch not far from the men of the company, he squatted down with the agitators among the blossoming gorze bushes thickly swarming with bees and wasps—this was a deliberate piece of strategy to keep them awake—and gave them the latest communiqués received by regimental wireless and made a comprehensive review of the international situation.

While in hospital Spivak had read numerous books and magazine articles about the war and world politics. As he began his instructive talk with the agitators, Spivak thought to himself humorously: "I smartened up a good bit during

that time, like I'd been through a proficiency course for political personnel. I have that Fritz to thank who put me out of gear for three months. Better let the boys have it all quickly before another Fritz snuffs me out altogether. My notes are so illegible that nobody will make them out and they'll be wasted."

With regard to the immediate objectives of the battalion and the regiment Spivak told the agitators what he had heard himself at the divisional political department and conference of regimental C.O.'s—that execution of combat orders would be considered exemplary only in the event of the Germans being trapped and destroyed and not merely driven out.

Pulling out of his map-case and from the inside of his top-boots two or three dozen booklets, he distributed them to the agitators. He had received the literature in the political department. It included Sholokhov's new serial, stories by Grossman and articles by Ehrenburg. He had not distributed the literature the previous night as he had wanted first to size up the new agitators—there might have been some whom neither Sholokhov nor Ehrenburg would have done any good. He also distributed special brochures dealing with army tactics in mountainous terrain warfare that he had providently bought in Poltava.

"Mind you don't lose them, you'll soon be needing them. When I showed these brochures at the political department they fairly pounced on them. Divisional C.O. even sent his aide to ask me for one. We'll soon have to learn how to fight on goat trails."

Following his usual custom, Spivak, with a glance at his watch, allotted twenty minutes to answering questions. In his talks with the agitators and the soldiers this arrangement of answering all kinds of questions was his favourite titbit. It gave him a chance to find out what was uppermost in men's minds.

Sometimes a sudden vital question would start a discussion again on an entirely new topic which turned out to be more important than the one he had come prepared to ventilate.

The first question put to the regimental agitator after an hour's talk on international affairs was the usual one—would the Allies soon open a second front in Europe?

"Where have you been all the time, sleeping?" the men began shouting at the unfortunate questioner. "What you got ears for? The Captain spoke about the second front, didn't he? Or d'you want to be told the exact date and hour? Who can tell you that? Go to a fortune-teller."

Another agitator asked:

"Is there a possibility of the war ending suddenly by a revolution or a coup in Germany?"

One elderly soldier who had a daughter in Hamburg asked:

"Won't Hitler kill off all the Soviet people who have been carted off to Germany before we get there? What would it cost him to add to all his evil deeds another one? Or is our Government giving this matter its attention? Hasn't Hitler been given an ultimatum that if he kills our people, say, we'll shoot all the German war prisoners?"

The men knew that Spivak had recently been home and many questions were asked him about life in the liberated towns and villages.

Spivak, in no hurry to leave, answered every question in detail, closely scanning the faces of the speakers and trying to remember new names.

As always, when the men were at leisure and nobody expected in an hour's time to hear the command: "All out, line up!" Spivak went on answering questions far beyond his prescribed twenty minutes, forgetting that he and the men needed a rest. He went on until he was sure he had made himself

clear, carried away by his own words and interspersing grave matters with the salt of his humour.

Getting tired of standing, Spivak sat down on the ground, leaning on one side with his bruised leg stretched out. One question did not elicit a reply, and after a long pause the questioner rose to repeat it: "Comrade Captain, in what year. . . ." but the rest of the men waved him down: "Sh-sh!" The Captain was asleep, snoring softly.

Sergeant Fomin gently drew the Captain's arm from under his head and put his map-case under it.

"All right, boys, that's all."

Spivak's thick mobile brows lifted in his sleep, his lips slightly parted and his chin dropped. His thin haggard face looked very tired.

The agitators and the men went back to their trenches leaving the Captain to his sleep.

Runner Zavalishin, with a soldier from Razumovsky's platoon who had stormed the flour mill that morning together with Spivak, were making for battalion headquarters from the Fourth Company. Seeing the familiar long-legged body of the Captain on the ground they both rushed up to him with an exclamation: "Killed?"—but on seeing that he was asleep they stood for a minute at his side, then broke and arranged a twig of the bush over his head to keep the sun off and ambled away, talking about the Captain:

"He's my idea of an officer," said Zavalishin. "Awfully chummy with us common soldiers. Likes to have a chat with the boys. He's from the collective farm himself. From the same place as our Senior Lieutenant."

"That's not the point, Andrei. It's not because he's from a collective farm," said his companion. "None of us are of the gentry. There ain't no gentry today. It's just that he's an open-hearted man. He's not a snob."

"He's the right man on the right job," said Zavalishin. "No wonder he gets a thousand beans. He's a topnotcher! 'Tain't only that he knows what's what himself, but he'll explain a thing to a fellow until it's as plain as a pikestaff. . . . Now, we had an agitator before he joined our outfit—Senior Lieutenant Arefyev—well, none of us could make out what they wanted him for in the regiment. Distribute the newspapers to each battalion? The postman could do that, or any private soldier, you don't need to keep an officer for that job. Nobody ever saw him outside the commandant's squad or the medical clearing station, and if he did happen to come down to the battalion when we were holding defensive positions he'd crawl into an empty dugout and lay there reading books or writing something or other. I don't say, mind you,—a man like that has to look into a book now and then, but you tell the other fellows what you've seen in that book instead of mumbling it to yourself. What good do we get out of it? Ain't I right?"

And so, stretched out on the sun-warmed green grass beneath a gorze bush, lulled by the monotonous buzzing of the bees, Captain Spivak slept soundly for two hours until he was awakened by a shell explosion near at hand. The Germans were still peppering the village at rare intervals.

On his way to regimental headquarters Spivak dropped in again on Petrenko.

The owners of the cottage, an old man on a crutch wearing a clean linen shirt with an old Russian St. George's cross pinned over his breast, his old wife, a lad of ten and a young daughter-in-law were scrubbing and cleaning and setting in order the living rooms and placing out the things they had brought up from the cold cellar. Everybody was excited, darting hither and thither, talking all together in loud voices like people under the influence of drink. The old woman would every now and then slap her forehead, forgetting what she

had come out for, then stop in the doorway and talk to the runners lying on the ground outside the hut:

"You've no idea what those varmint were up to! Shooting people's cattle! What did the poor animals do to 'em? They shot old Moroz's cow in the shed. You might think they ate it, but no, they had other things to think of besides meat, they did it just like that, out of sheer spite. The same with Olex Dovbusha's cow, and Kolomichikha's and Dubnik's—all the people on our street who hadn't hidden the beasts in the forest. . . . But when we heard our guns banging away, we weren't sorry for anything. So help me God if it ain't true—isn't that so Grampa? I says to him: 'Let 'em bang the cannon, Grampa, I wouldn't be sorry even if they hit the old house. . . . We had a lot of those Germans staying in the house, maybe a whole battalion, maybe even a division. They made holes in the walls and put a mortar up on the roof. Oh, if only one shell had hit the house it'd have squashed a lot of those varmint. We were sitting in the cold cellar and I says to Grampa: 'Let 'em shoot, Grampa! We'll make it up. We'll build a new cottage. As long as we get rid of the accursed hounds.' "

The boy came running out every time with fresh news: "Mum! D'you know Otto Franz who lived at Auntie Oxana's place—he's lying by the smithy, black as earth. Uncle Panas has taken his boots off him."—"Mum! They're bringing in the German prisoners! That baldy's there too, the one who twisted our goose's neck. Go and have a look!"—"Mum! A German has hidden himself in Ignatenko's well. One of our soldiers made as if he was going to throw a grenade down and the fellow started squealing like a slaughtered pig! They're gonna pull him up with a rope!"

His mother, her face frozen in a broad vacuous smile, absent-mindedly picked up a rag to clean the windows and, leaving it unfinished, set about scraping smoked iron pots

with a knife blade, then dropping everything she sat down on the stone steps with her arms hanging lifelessly at her sides and said, gazing at the laughing faces of the soldiers:

"Dear God! Can it be true, or is it a dream? Have we really lived to see the day?"

Grandpa, who kept scolding the women for dawdling around doing nothing, went into the cottage with an axe in his hand, forgot what he had brought it in for, and after roaming about with it from corner to corner, he too addressed himself to the soldiers:

"Our neighbour, the woman Yavdokha, comes running round the day before yesterday and says: 'Somebody came into the yard last night—two men—they stood by the cellar, rattled the latch and then went away....' 'Good Lord, you silly woman.' I says, 'that must ha' been our scouts! You should ha' come out told 'em all about the Germans.' And she says: 'Can it be,' she says, 'Grandpa, that the Red Army's coming back again?' 'They're coming all right,' I says. 'Can't you hear the artillery? That ain't thunder, it's big guns, I know that. Once the scouts ha' been around you can expect our troops.' And last night didn't those guns set up a racket. And what a racket it was! What calibre guns were they, boys? Eh? Aha, I thought they were six-inchers, I could tell by the sound." A minute later he came up and renewed the conversation. "What a racket it was! Reminded me of the Brusilov offensive. I fought there in the last war, you know, boys. But we didn't do that job properly when we fought the Kaiser. It ain't enough to treat 'em like the master of the house who kicks an ugly customer out o' doors and puts the lock on—you gotta chase him down to his own home and knock the sawdust out of him! I'd show him! Here old gal! Hanna! Airing your heels again! Come on, get some more weeds for the fire, heat up more water—maybe somebody'd like to have

a wash. Take the boys' foot wraps and wash 'em. I was in the army myself, I know what it's like. Is there any flour left in the bin? Go ahead, bake 'em some pies with 'taters! Come on, make it snappy! What the devil's the matter with you? You look like a chicken with it's head cut off! Gritsko! Snap down to the well and fetch some water, I see the women have gone gander today."

One of the rooms was occupied by Petrenko, his clerk and signalmen.

The battalion commander had already managed to get a shave, and he now lay in a clean undershirt on a wooden bed, listening to the reports of company officers (he refused to speak to an officer unless the latter was shaved and had changed his collar), and issuing various orders for getting the companies back in trim in preparation for new battles.

The clerk was looking through some papers by a table. On the wall nearby hung his guitar, which instrument followed him everywhere in the officers' baggage cart.

The signalman sat by the open window with earphones on his head, rolling pellets of bread which he threw to the starlings hopping about under an apple tree.

When the last company commander had left the room Krapivka packed his papers into his case with a sad and pensive air, reached for his guitar and touched the strings.

Petrenko lay on his back with open eyes, his hands under his head. Noise did not interfere with him when he wanted to go to sleep.

Krapivka tuned the instrument, cleared his throat, and began to sing softly in a slightly husky but agreeable, expressive baritone:

When I was postillion in the good old days.

When youth and strength were mine....

Spivak sat down on the edge of Petrenko's bed and rolled and lit himself a cigarette.

"We intended giving Razumovsky a junior lieutenancy," Petrenko said in a low voice. "He was a capable officer. He'd have handled a company. If anybody from headquarters is going up to division, please ask him, Pavlo Grigorievich, to look up the medical station and find out how he's getting on. He's in a bad way. The doctor here said he won't pull through.... We ought to write home to the men's families while we're not on the move."

"As far as Razumovsky's concerned there's nobody to write home to if he dies," said Spivak. "He hasn't any relatives."

And he told Petrenko how Razumovsky dreaded the end of the war, when he would be told that no more Germans could be killed.

"I'm sorry about Arkhipov, the anti-tank rifleman. Don't you know him? Whom shall we give his Party card to? Where's the Party organizer? Has anyone seen Rodionov? Oh, he went down the river to do his washing. He came in for a bit of bad luck today too. Did you hear how a bucket of treacle came down on his head? A direct hit it was.... Perhaps you'll take it and hand it over to Kostromin?"

Petrenko reached his hand out to the stool on which, covered by a newspaper, lay Bolotnikov's medal "For Defence of Stalingrad," Maximenko's medal "For Valour," Mikhailuk's Order of the Red Star and Arkhipov's Party card.

Spivak picked up the Party card, whose covers were pasted with dry blood, and put it into his pocket.

"D'you remember Maximenko? He was one of our veterans. He once carried me off the battlefield when I was wounded.... It's been a bad day today, Pavlo Grigorievich; we've lost many good boys."

...And suddenly my horse stopped dead in its tracks.
All quivering, with eyes amazed....

sang the clerk, his head bent over the finger-board of his guitar, his eyes closed, swaying his body in time to the music.

Krapivka today did not play his favourite rollicking tunes, like "Ride Along Gypsies," and "The Wind in the Field." That morning, he had buried his dearest friend and fellow-villager from their Kuban home, Sergeant of the Fifth Company Maxim Bachurin, with ten other fallen heroes, on the village square. For close on three years they had trudged the roads of the battlefronts together and had been inseparable in the days when they enjoyed a break in combat duty and were engaged in training replacements in the rear zone.

Bachurin was a good accordion player, while Krapivka played on the guitar and sang, and both were as engaging and brave a pair of sergeants as ever won the hearts of the village girls.

Bachurin lost his life in the German tank attack on the Fifth Company, when an explosive bullet from a large-calibre machine gun hit him in the chest. Krapivka had lowered his friend into the grave with his own hands and thrown the first handful of earth over him. . . .

Mourning the loss of his comrade, however, did not prevent him from including Bachurin and two other killed men in the personnel list, giving them another day's lease of life for commissary supply purposes and receiving their liquor allowances which he quaffed to their memory at dinner. Perhaps that is why the fingers of the battalion clerk plucked so uncertainly at the guitar strings and his accompaniment was so out of tune, though the slightly cracked and husky voice had a peculiarly soul-stirring quality and inexpressible sadness.

"I believe, Mikola," said Spivak, "our nerves have become dulled here. It's natural. The front, battles, death staring you in the face all round. Sometimes when you'd see a dead

man being carried through the village you couldn't shake the memory off for a week, thinking—a man has died. And today we buried eleven men. Tomorrow we'll forget them. There'll be new battles, new losses. But there'll come a day, Mikola, when we'll remember every single one of those who fell at our side and got up no more...."

Krapivka came to the end of his song. He twanged his guitar for a while with a thoughtful air, tightened up the bass string that had come down, struck a chord and began a waltz tune, the favourite song both of the battalion commander and Captain Spivak:

Steppeland vast and wild,
The lonely trail is long....

Petrenko closed his eyes.

Runner Zavalishin, a keen music lover and not a bad singer himself, peeped in at the door, stood hesitating on the threshold for a minute casting dubious looks at the officers, then stepped into the room, sat down on the bench next to Krapivka and softly joined in the refrain.

Krapivka dropped into second, yielding the solo part to the newcomer.

He pledged his solemn word

Zavalishin possessed a small, but clear and remarkably capacious tenor. He managed the top register freely, without the slightest effort, and sang, like Krapivka, with considerable feeling.

Spivak sat with bent head. All noise and conversation in the adjoining room of the cottage were hushed. The soldiers crowded round the open door.

Lead the horses home,
Give them to my Dad,
And to my Mother dear
My parting kiss convey....

sang the two strong, harmonious voices, one slightly husky, the other clear, resonant and sad.

The melancholy song affected everybody. Two women—the young mistress of the cottage and her neighbour—came up to the open window by which the signalman sat with his ear-phones. Two soldiers exchanged glances and sat down in the doorway, composing themselves to hearing out this improvised concert to the end. The old woman had something boiling on the stove, but she was giving more attention to the song. She waved her hand at the simmering pot with a gesture of annoyance, and took up a position behind the two soldiers.

Grandpa brought in an armful of dry weeds and threw them noisily into a corner near the stove—a proceeding which evoked a chorus of angry hissing from the audience. He turned round in surprise, then hearing the sounds of singing, he looked into the room over the heads of the soldiers, tiptoed to the door and stood listening next to the old woman.

Bid my wife farewell,
Say I loved her true,
And this our wedding ring
In memory do I send. . . .

Petrenko's face, as he lay motionless on the bed, twisted with a look of anguish. He suddenly lifted himself on his elbow and shouted angrily:

"Stop that! Couldn't find any other time than this! Who gave you permission to come in, Zavalishin? Warbling away like a Kursk nightingale! What's the high jinks about, Krapivka? Did you deliver the personnel report? Did you write the Fourth Department what they asked for? Where are the rewards?"

Spivak shot a look of surprise at his friend.

The song broke off. Forgetting his cap on the bench, Zavalishin slipped quickly out of the room. The women moved away from the window. The men sitting in the doorway

sprang to their feet with alacrity and went out shutting the door after them. Krapivka hung his guitar on the wall with a deep sigh and sat down at the table.

"I delivered everything, Comrade Senior Lieutenant. There's one little report left to do—about the trophies."

"Why didn't you do it? Weren't you told to have it done by 16.00? Can't you do things without having to be reminded? The result'll be they'll write it all down to some darned Solovyov, like they did the tanks."

Spivak gave his friend another look and understood him. He remembered how they had lain together one winter at the regimental command post on the river Miuss, in a shell-wrecked railway booth. The regiment was taking and giving heavy punishment. There remained no more than a hundred bayonets. The height that was being contested passed from hand to hand ten times a day. Every foot of ground was littered with shell and bomb splinters. The regiment paid heavy toll in officers and men. Everyone was on his last legs from ceaseless battles, sleepless nights and the cold, to which may be added the plague of lice, the absence of tobacco and shortage of bread which the men had not received for several days.

One night the wireless operator at C.P. tuned in some good music. Amid the snoring of the haggard-faced exhausted men sitting on the floor there stole the soft and tender strains of a violin and piano being played somewhere far, far away. All the men woke up and stirred. The wireless man turned the knob of the variometer and the music came in louder and clearer. So distinct and pure were the sounds of the singing violin and the liquid notes of the piano strings that one had the impression that the musicians were playing somewhere very near, and instead of sitting huddled on the dirty, crowded floor of a half-wrecked railway booth which served as the only refuge where men could come in for a brief moment to

warm themselves, they imagined themselves in a big, brilliantly lit concert hall in a city that knew neither air raids nor bombardments. For several minutes they listened to the music spellbound. Then somebody sighed, another said: "A lovely tune," and a third pulled his cap down lower over his ears. And suddenly a storm of protest arose and men shouted at the wireless operator: "Shut it up! Stop it! Turn it off! Who wants music now!"

Petrenko lay down on the bed again. The Party organizer of the battalion, Junior Lieutenant Rodionov, came in wearing a still moist laundered tunic and a pair of wet clinging trousers that looked like old-fashioned riding breeches of Nicholas the First days.

Hearing the sounds of shouting from inside, and almost colliding in the doorway with Zavalishin when the latter made his precipitate exit, Rodionov was glad of the diversion and inwardly thankful at seeing the battalion commander and Captain Spivak angry over something or other. They probably would not tease and question him about his treacle misadventure, of which he had heard enough that day.

Sitting down to the table beside Krapivka and laying out some papers which he drew from his map-case, he busied himself with writing.

Spivak exchanged a few more words with Petrenko about his political service assistant, Senior Lieutenant Nikiforov, who had got stuck somewhere in the reserves after his hospital discharge, and, being a journalist by profession, would probably receive an appointment on the divisional or army newspaper and would not come back to the battalion. No doubt Rodionov, who was promoted to his present job from company sergeant, would have to fill his place until a halt was called before the launching of a new offensive, or, very likely now, until the end of the war.

"It's a pity, Sergei Ivanovich," said Spivak addressing Rodionov, "that you didn't attend the conference I held with the agitators. It would have come in useful to you too. I made a review of the international situation from sources that you won't find in the newspapers. Where were you? Getting yourself cleaned?"

"You see, Comrade Captain," answered Rodionov with a sheepish smile, "I've been in another accident today." He slapped his wet shirt and trousers to illustrate his words. "Did you hear about it? I've got the devil's own luck. Must have been born under a dark cloud. One day I got burned by a rocket while I was asleep—it fell straight on this here spot and singed off the whole bottom of my trousers. Today I had a worse experience. People get killed by the Fritzes through a bullet or shrapnel, but the devil knows how they're going to get me. I won't die from a bullet, Comrade Captain, you can take my word for it. Next time probably a damned Junkers plane will crash-land on my head or a bridge'll give way under me when I make a crossing."

"You're such a good target, that's why you get everything tumbling about you."

"No, that's not the reason, Comrade Captain. It's an ill-fated man I am. Of all the crazy things that happen to a man at the front the craziest always come my way. The darned stuff even trickled into my case and messed up the whole office. I've got to sit and rewrite all the questionnaires again."

"I warned you not to go nosing about where you're not wanted. Isn't there anybody in the battalion besides you who can handle a machine gun? You're forgetting that you're now a political officer for the whole battalion. If you landed a job as member of the War Council I suppose you'd still be crawling about with a machine gun...."

Petrenko enquired of Spivak how he had been treated in

the hospital, whether the bone had healed satisfactorily—he had had two bullet wounds in the shoulder and arm—and whether he could use his arm as well as he used to.

Spivak raised his arm, demonstrating that he could not lift it above the level of his shoulder."

"You may count half an arm out," he said. "One half's left for business, the other half for show. If a man's going to lose fifty per cent capacity for every limb injured he'll find himself coming home all for show."

"There's something wrong with my leg, too," said Petrenko. "The old wound is beginning to hurt, just here. I can feel the swelling. In damp weather it's torture...." He then turned over on his side, intimating his desire to have a rest by closing his eyes. "You take a nap too, Pavlo Grigorievich. Lie down on the bench."

For some unaccountable reason it suddenly dawned on Spivak that thus had his father died, lying on a bare wooden bed, dressed in a clean shirt, with his face to the wall. He lay for two days, fully conscious, talked to the family, called up the children to his bedside and embraced them, and then turned his face to the wall and never spoke another word all day long. He died in the evening. "What's the matter with me today—thinking all the time about dead men!" Spivak broke off his train of thought with a feeling of annoyance.

"Well, Mikola, I'm going," he said, laying his hand on Petrenko's shoulder.

"Going? Better have a rest. Must you go up to headquarters?"

"Just one minute, Comrade Captain," said Rodionov. "I'm finishing my political report for Major Kostromin, you can take it along."

"Okay, finish it. But don't pile it on about morale—make it short. I was here, and I know how the men acquitted them-

selves. Kostromin all the same'll make me write in to divisional P.D. on behalf of the regiment. He doesn't like to bother his head with reports. Are all the men alive who were enrolled in the Party last night?"

"One man is wounded—Zinchenko. Nothing serious. In the flesh of the leg. He won't go any further than the battalion medical station. I'm sending his application to the divisional Party commission as well."

"Go ahead with enrolling new Party members, Rodionov," said Petrenko without turning round. "Have a heart-to-heart chat with the men who made themselves conspicuous in recent fighting. The Captain here's been telling me how bad off they are for personnel back in the rear. The new membership we're getting here is providing personnel not only for the army, but for the rear—remember that."

"Exactly," confirmed Spivak. "I've been thinking—how are the demobilized soldiers going to join the Party when the war's over? They may be asked—why didn't you join the Party at the front, where every man went through the test of war? They'll have to fish around for references, hunt up old pals and persuade people that they weren't cowards, or, as they say, of the kind that is neither fish, flesh nor good red herring. They're very careful there now about taking people into the Party. I don't remember anybody having been accepted in our district since the Germans were ousted. That's being too cautious, if you ask me. Looks like playing for safety. I'd go about it more resolutely. We here at the battle-front can size up a man at a glance. You don't have to know a man long—go into battle with him two or three times and you'll soon find out whether he holds his country dear and is prepared to give his life for it or not. And the position back there? They're having a pretty hot time too. In the good times before the war, before tackling the sowing campaign, we used

to reckon up results on the output plan beforehand and tell everybody—this year you're going to get eight or ten kilos of corn per work-day, go ahead and make things buzz. Now people know they can't expect such big earnings straight away, you can't get ten kilos per head out of a ruined farm. There's a war on, you've got to help the army, you've got to reinvest enormous sums in the business to put it on its feet. Yet you've got Stakhanovites, men and women who started ploughing one and a half and two times the rates with cows from the very first day, and are still going strong. They plough the land, go about collecting ash, and dung and fowl droppings, and girding up their loins for new record-breaking achievements. Girl tractor drivers are working on their machines for sixteen hours at a stretch. Who says these are not heroes? Who says they're not Communists deep down? What more d'you want? You can size up a person now in labour as easily as you can in battle. As to what these people were doing under the Germans—well, there again you've got to ask others. If I'd have my way I'd enroll people in the Party back there at an open district Party meeting, and the more non-party people attending the better. I'd have notices posted all over the place: today so-and-so and so-and-so are going to be enrolled in the Party. Let people come to the meeting and say what they know about them. . . . A penny for your thoughts, Rodionov. Finished? Well, put a full stop. Don't seal it up, let it go like that."

"Well, Mikola," said Spivak, gathering up his tent-cape and map-case and bending over Petrenko, "let's write home, eh? About what we talked last night."

"To Semyon Karpovich?" Petrenko opened his eyes. "Certainly."

"Together?"

"Well, yes, if you'll have me. I've something to say too

that I'd like the comrades to know. My idea of the letter, Pavlo Grigorievich, is a broader one. We should get all we accumulated in these years off our chests. They probably didn't have as much time as we did to do some thinking. They didn't lie about in the trenches for six months at a stretch like we did, looking at the same bit of bush in front of us and turning over in our minds our whole life as it was and will be. . . ."

"What is it going to be? A 'War and Peace' novel? Roosevelt's message to Congress? Or simply written speeches by non-attending members of a district Party conference? Well, speeches are not so bad. If we get home we'll take the floor ourselves, and if we don't—there you have our proposals and suggestions. Greetings from the front from your Party colleagues Petrenko and Spivak. That's it, eh?"

They decided that Spivak would begin with his impressions of his recent trip home, after which they would get together somewhere and finish the letter between them. Very likely they'd have to do it in several sittings when they got the time.

"When will I be seeing you now?" asked Petrenko.

"I don't know. I intended paying a visit to the mortar men tomorrow. The divisional C.O. promised the regiment a rest after Lipitsa. If the break lasts, I'll look you up tomorrow, perhaps. I want to give a lecture on the international situation for the officers and noncoms. Well, s'long!"

"I say, Pavlo Grigorievich," Petrenko called out when Spivak was across the threshold, "make enquiries about our awards in the personnel department. I sent in commendation for eight men. Godchenko and Gulik for the Order of the Red Star—that's for the tank. Your Andryukhin's on the list for the 'For Valour' medal. Zavalishin as well. You don't think it's too much for him?"

"For one Fritz? It is a bit. And the Fritz wasn't much of a catch—they say he gave himself up like a lamb. Never mind, he's worth it. He wasn't guilty of any great heroism, but then he stopped the only one of the enemy who managed to filter through."

"You can go on with the concert when I fall asleep," Petrenko said to his clerk, turning over again towards the wall. "I didn't know Zavalishin had such a fine voice. Almost like Lemeshev's at the Grand Opera. Put his name down, Rodionov, for battalion theatricals. We'll send him to the amateur artists' contest when we meet the Allies in Berlin. But he needs knocking into shape with a good dose of footslogging to remind him of discipline. He looks like a clodhopper out of the awkward squad. Doesn't know how to address an officer properly, too much of the hail-fellow about him."

After lingering for a while in conversation with the cottage owners, during which he discussed the Brusilov drive with the old veteran and tried some of the mistress' potato pies which she had baked for the men, Spivak set out for regimental headquarters without enquiring where they were located, by the simple method of following the telephone wire drawn straight across the yard and street—"following the cotton" as the signalmen say.

DO THE GIRLS sing songs again back home when coming in from the field?" Petrenko asked his friend when they next met. "From what you've been telling me there don't seem to be many girls left. . . . Or are they the kind that'd still be singing, even though there were two of 'em left in a brigade?"

"Yes, they sing," answered Spivak. "I've heard 'em singing several times. It's a good sign, you're right—I thought of that too. But all the songs are mixed up. They sing our soldiers' songs like "Let's have a smoke," and new ones composed by somebody out there—all about the Fritzes. At the beginning, they say, people didn't sing. They were haunted by ghastly memories. The Germans shot a column of war prisoners in Big Ravine, past which the road leads out to the fields, and threw the bodies into the well. A common grave has now been made over the well. Last winter, on the vegetable plots by the old windmill, the shepherds found three bodies hanging from the willows after the leaves had fallen. The bodies were all decayed and unrecognizable—they might have been our people. There are plenty of folks missing from their homes who are still being searched for. The Germans carted off people they'd arrested to town, and when the women came the next day to hand over parcels, they were told: 'Not here.' Where they'd gone to, nobody knew. It was a dangerous thing to walk about the fields. At our place they organized special training courses for collective farm mine clearers. Olga

Rudchenko—she's team leader now in place of Marina—pulled out twenty mines on her piece of ground and rendered them harmless. Then people were discouraged by the amount of damage done, and the weeds. But now they're cheering up, beginning to sing. Olga even treated me to champagne. There were some German supply trucks parked in her yard, and she lifted a whole case and hid it among the straw. She cracked the whole lot with the women. Opened two bottles for me and Oxana. And she left a last bottle in case Kuzma comes home. It's a wonder Prokopchuk didn't ease her out of that champagne!"

"So it'll be with our folks, Pavlo Grigorievich—if we don't come back they'll grieve a while and then begin to sing."

"You can't help it, Mikola, life will come into its own. I wouldn't want my Oxana to mourn over me all her life if I got killed. It wouldn't make me any happier, would it? Let 'em sing and have a good time...."

"Have any collective farms started lagging behind yet?" enquired Petrenko after a pause.

"It's a bit early in the day for that. Why, they've only just begun to live. When would you have them start lagging? Though, as the saying goes—give a dog a bad name and he'll live up to it. It could be managed in a single season."

"How's the *Eighth of March* farm getting on—they were always being put through the mill at conferences and rallies for cattle-plague and harvesting losses."

"I don't know, I haven't been there. Look at the short furlough I had. It left me no time for gadding about the countryside. I saw their progress report though—didn't look too bright. They'd fallen behind again with the sowing. Mind you, it couldn't be said that they were worse off than other farms. As a matter of fact more collective farm property survived in Grushevka than in our place. They're situated a bit off the main road and they say there were few Germans there

—they practically saw nothing of them. The cottages are intact, and a good deal of the cattle too. Yet their sowing was poor in comparison with other collective farms.”

“You were talking about the joy our victories brought to people,” said Petrenko. “The same applies there. It isn’t much of a joy for people to be living in such backward farms like our *Eighth of March* farm, forsaken both by God and the district committee, if such farms ever do reappear on the horizon. Why don’t we hear such expressions in the army as a backward regiment, a lagging battalion? It would be curious if a regiment didn’t execute combat orders and the divisional C.O. started making excuses for it before the commander-in-chief: ‘What can you expect of ’em, Comrade Commander-in-Chief—the regiment’s been backward ever since the beginning of the war.’ Yet even at the best of times before the war you could always find a miserable collective farm in one or another district which, despite the district’s general good figures, messes up every campaign year in and year out. Why, when you come to think of it, the folks in such a place have never really tasted all the benefits the Soviet government holds out to them. It’s not as if it were happening in some hole of a place, stuck away in a bogged-in spot you couldn’t get at spring or autumn. As likely as not it’d be somewhere in the district centre right under the noses of the Party committee secretary and the chairman of the District Executive Committee. Everybody seems to take it for granted that it’s a natural thing to have one or two backward collective farms in every district to twenty or thirty good ones. That’s why I asked you whether there were any farms which started steering that way from the very outset.”

Zavalishin, who was present at this conversation, saluted Spivak, as officer of superior rank, and asked him in proper regulation style for permission to address himself to Petrenko.

"You were quite right, Comrade Senior Lieutenant, in saying that people were having a dull time in the backward farms. We had a farm like that in our district, where I used to live before the war. It was called the *Progress* collective farm. The name itself's a mockery. We dubbed it *Regress*. Well, the poor thing had no luck from the day it was born, and it couldn't get on its business legs right up to the war. It was a big farm. So they broke it up into four independent collective farms and began dividing the property. Our farm got the piggeries, the *New Victories Farm* got the vegetable plots, *Lighthouse* got the orchard and the dairy farm, while *Progress* got no subsidiary at all—just plain agriculture. The farm was left holding the baby. As to the land it had, it wasn't fit for anything but grazing. *Lighthouse's* fields were all straight tillage, not a stream or watering place anywhere around—so they gives 'em the dairy too. *Progress*, which had nothing but hayfields and barren ground, had its tilling plan cut down to one hectare. The farm didn't get proper attention from the very beginning. And, of course, it didn't get anything near the income of the other farms from agriculture alone.

"Then there started a catawampus with the farm chairmen. One of 'em took to drink, another helped himself to funds and got landed in the dock, and the third was a bully who made the air blue with his curses. He used to rave at the farm board members and the brigade leaders: 'I'll knock your blocks off and smear the brains over the wall.' He frightened people away with his bullying—some of the best workers left the farm, all the craftsmen quitted, the smithies, carpenters, wheelwrights. Well, after that *Progress* went to the dogs altogether. They managed to drag the sowing on till St. Peter's Day, threshing till New Year's Eve, crops were failures, they were over their heads in debt. Our farm'd reckon things in kilos, they in grams, we'd count in rubles, they in kopeks. Even

an outsider could see what was wrong—all they wanted was good management. But no, they had to go and elect Misha Antipov, a fellow as inefficient as the previous chairman,—all he was really fit for was a watchman's job to scare the rooks away—I wouldn't let him come near the handling of a farm business. He was kicked out of three collective farms in our district—and all for the same reason: he was barter-mad. He'd swap a truck for a threshing machine, the threshing machine for a pedigree bull, the bull for a ram, the ram for some Chinese geese. That was all he did—swapping things. The sowing campaign, weeding, harvesting—that was none of his business. He went about day and night from farm to farm looking for something to exchange and somewhere he could wet a bargain. He was hauled over the coals at the district committee, reprimanded for the last time and told to mend his ways. But the lesson didn't last very long.

“The secretary who gave him the reprimand went away to take up studies, and no sooner had he gone than Antipov was back at his old game. He sold all the pedigree colts in the farm and set about building an electric station with the proceeds. The mares remained uncovered and the electric station was dropped—he bartered the turbine for a buttermaker. And the buttermaker couldn't be used because it had no motor. He piled up a heap of iron in the shed, put a lock on the door and that was the end of it. Yes, people had a pretty rotten time in that farm. They were a crusty lot to look at even—the boys and girls were poorly dressed, the kiddies looked miserable. Our collective farm members were buying themselves motorbikes, while people from that farm used to go up to market in the spring to buy bread.

“The local district authorities never seemed to have the time to tackle this farm, and set things in order. Sometimes

when working in the field we'd see the blue limousine coming down from town, and when it'd get to the crossroad we'd start guessing—would it turn right or left. To the right meant our farm, to the left was *Progress*. Of course, it swung off to the right, to our farm. Our place was like a blessed magnet for them. It was a prosperous collective farm, people went about their work with enthusiasm, everybody was content and visitors were always welcomed. At the *Progress* farm there was nothing but complaints and squabbles and confusion—the uproar was enough to set one's head in a whirl. I've no idea how things are there now. Misha Antipov must have been called up to the army—he's about my age. Maybe it was their salvation."

"Talking of backward farms," said Spivak, "if you were to raise that question before such a man as Nikitchenko, he'd spin you a whole theory. He'd tell you it's Utopia, not all the farms can be leading farms, somebody must be backward. He'll claim that it's even borne out by the proverb about God having given a man irregular fingers, some being longer and some shorter, and that there's no such thing as absolute equality in nature. But you and I remember how the collective farms of our M.T.S. used to work. It wasn't such a small service section either—twelve collective farms. Were there any backward farms? There certainly were. But what were they backward in? There are different kinds of backwardness. The *Bolshevik* farm completed the sowing of early cereals at ten o'clock in the morning, the *Peremoga* farm was late, it was backward, if you please, because it didn't get through the same job till two in the afternoon. We sum up the results and give the palm to the *Bolshevik*. The same thing went on among the different brigades. They were backward in a matter of hours, sometimes perhaps a day or two. It sometimes happened during the very busy season that one of the brigades was given a

helping hand by the other brigades at harvesting or grain deliveries. But there never was such a difference as one collective farm paying its members ten kilos' of grain per work-day while another paid only a kilo or a kilo and a half. Things had never reached such a stage."

"Let's put that in the letter, too, Pavlo Grigorievich," said Petrenko. "We may live to see the life that comes after the war or we may not, but we've got to say our say about it. Life's beginning anew. Come into the new house, friends, wipe your feet on the doorstep. Don't repeat the old mistakes. Now, you were talking about Prokopchuk. But the man hasn't dropped from the skies, has he? He existed before, but he was not so noticeable when there was a bigger active following in the district. Neither is Nikitchenko a new man. You say he goes about mourning over the ruins. And before the war he went about mourning over real live things. He was my chief, I ought to know. The trouble I had to get him to stand up for my irrigation canal project on the District Committee! 'Haven't we got our hands full enough as it is, Mikola Ilyich,' he says. 'We'll rue the day we ever started on that construction job. They'll approve it, fix a date, draw you up a work schedule and give us both a trimming at every blessed meeting of the Party Bureau for not fulfilling the work. It's easier said than done—twelve kilometres of hand-digging, spadework! That canal of yours'll give us a hell of a time. It's only asking for trouble! Does our district need it more badly than others?' I know the fellow.

"Well, in those days we used to put up with bungling cobblers, as you call them. Perhaps we were more easy-going. But now we'd like to see them go barking up another tree. If the war didn't put more sense and guts into them, what else can be said? You write just like that, Pavlo Grigorievich, and ask Serdyuk to read it out in their presence. Write that

we'd like the new life on the liberated land, after the horrors of the war, to be beautiful and happy. If you can't make things beautiful at once out of hewed-down orchards and burnt villages, make it beautiful in men's relations to each other and in the feats of their labour. We'd like nothing and nobody to interfere with the honest toil and striving of the farms' foremost workers. We want the joy of victory, the joy of rebuilding Soviet life to reach every nook and cranny and we don't want to see the old sore of backward collective farms recurring in a few years' time. We want to see only true leaders and builders at the head of Party affairs and not a single self-seeker. We want a good deal. We've shed a lot of blood on this land, and we demand a lot of the future life. It couldn't be otherwise. That is what we're fighting for. We're not on our defensive now. We've long been on the offensive. Our objective is not to win back old positions, but to gain new ones."

"I'd put it like this, Comrade Senior Lieutenant," inserted Zavalishin, "in our carpenters' way: when you make a new thing out of old boards, drive the nails into new holes, it'll be all the stronger for it."

"And there are some people," said Spivak with a smile, "who yearn for the re-establishment of pre-war life in another way. Have you ever spoken with Krapivka on this subject, Mikola? Have you, Zavalishin? Oh, he'll tell you some interesting things. Before coming to the army he was chairman of a Leather Repairs *Artel* somewhere in the Kuban. You have a chat with him when he's feeling blue, when supply waggons are late in coming up and he feels a bit peckish or when the mistress' cow doesn't yield any milk—in general, when you see him going about looking glum and out of sorts.

"I had a chat with him once. 'Ah, Comrade Captain,' he said, 'life was sure a fine thing before the war, but we didn't

appreciate it properly. Just think—a kilo of herrings used to cost two rubles fifty, take as much as you like, a barrellful if you want. Prime Astrakhan as thick as your arm, fat and juicy, makes your mouth water. And what d'you say to the Don choice grade at four fifty, pickled to a T, with laurel leaves and the usual spices! Any shop you'd go into, all the shelves were overstocked with provisions. Every kind of sausage your heart desires—Epicurean, Lunch sausage, Warsaw sausage, Cracow sausage, Vienna sausages, Savaloys, tinned food galore. smoked salmon, hams. And as for the stuff that cheers, there was enough to drown yourself in, from the ordinary white to those liqueurs in little stone bottles which spread a smell around like scent when you uncork 'em. And how cheap it all was! Three fifteen a quarter of the white stuff. No cards, no queues.'

"He went on for an hour listing the stuff there was in the shops and how much it cost. I've forgotten the old prices and I don't know the new ones, but that fellow remembers them all to a kopek. 'Well, and how did we appreciate all those good things?' he said. 'You'd just drop in to a shop, by the way—now, how much d'you need for a snack?—you'd take a little of this, a little of that—wrap it up please—more paper'd go in the wrapping than the weight of the purchase—the bottle you'd stick into your pocket—you wouldn't even look at the sweets and pastries—food for babies, titbits, not worth looking at. The shop assistant tries to coax you into buying something else—wouldn't you like some honey and nut paste, fresh, just received? Oh, you'd only spoil your teeth with it! Ye gods! Why didn't I load up with the stuff, sap that I was? If I'd known what's gonna happen, and that this life wasn't going to come back for ten years maybe, I wouldn't have cared about my teeth, I'd have had false ones put in, and stowed away the groceries like a camel.' Here's a man cut up as if he was

guilty of a crime before the State for not having done his duty to his food and drink in peacetime.

"I began to cheer him up. Never mind, Makar Ivanovich, I said, we'll get our own back yet. The shop shelves will groan with the weight long before ten years are out. We'll even have more than before and cheaper than before. 'I'm not asking for that, Comrade Captain,' he says. 'It was cheap enough. Things'll suit me the way they were before. They were good enough. Who wants 'em cheaper? All I dream of, Comrade Captain, is to keep the appetite I've got out here at the front until things come back to what they were before the war. I don't want 'em any cheaper.' Then he goes on again: 'And the meat pies which the Meat Packing Plant used to sell—filled with liver, at thirty-five kopeks a piece! And the meat dumplings—the Siberian ones, cold-storaged, at two fifty a kilo!'

"He got me fairly worked up with all those reminiscences of his, and I felt I could eat my weight in wildcats. I went down to the mess squad and there the mess Sergeant was tearing his hair—the waggon with the extra rations caught a shell amidships, and there was nothing but porridge for supper, and that without fats. I began to see Krapivka's point about laying in a stock of bellytimber....

"Putting it in a nutshell, that Krapivka of yours wants everything to be exactly as it was before the war, three fifteen, not a kopek more or less."

Petrenko laughed and said:

"You can mention Krapivka, too, as a postscriptum. Semyon Karpovich is fond of a joke. This one is sure to tickle him and he'll read it to everybody."

"Well, how are they going to manage it all?" he concluded his suggestions which Spivak made notes of while he was speaking. "How are they going to set about putting the back-

ward farms straight, getting to know each and every Stakhonovite there is in the place, avoiding the temptation of reposing trust in unreliable men, and getting to the bottom of things themselves with a proper will to see things efficiently handled? I can't think of anything better than recommending them our frontline remedy—if the day's not long enough, put in a little night work. The way we do—marching in the daytime, attacking at night, or vice versa. Go at it tooth and nail. It isn't called the home front for the sake of the phrase. I bet you they've used that slogan in many a resolution of the District Party and Executive Committees. It speaks for itself—to those, of course, who know what the front is. And Semyon Karpovich knows what it is. He commanded a squadron in the Civil War. Let him remember the old days.”

Not Spivak and Petrenko alone, it appears, gave a lot of thought to future prospects, to the possibility of soon going back to their old professions, and of reunion with their old colleagues at home when the war was over.

The regimental commander, Major Goryunov, a Rostov man, burly, tall, swarthy-faced, with a stentorian booming voice, an old war horse of Civil War days, upon hearing that his agitator and his Second Battalion C.O. were writing home a big letter, one day during dinner in his tent, laid his heavy hand on Spivak's shoulder, saying:

“Now I've been thinking, too, agitator, and wondering how our people in Rostov-on-Don are going to rebuild the railway station. Have any of you ever been in Rostov, comrade officers? D'you know the district round the station? There's always a traffic jam near the railway station because of the branch line which runs right across the street. You'd be travelling to the railway station with your luggage on a tram or trolley-bus in a hurry to catch your train, looking at your watch and figuring you'd be able to make it by the skin

of your teeth, and when you finally arrive, a goods train would be standing right across the street barring your way. So there you were, you'd arrived. You could either sit in the tram and wait for the dratted thing to move off, or tramp half a kilometre with your luggage to get to the station—in either case you'd missed your train. Well, so I was thinking—would our Rostov architects leave things the old way when they start rebuilding the station and the surrounding streets? D'you mean to say they won't think of a reshift or of putting up the station in some other place? What?"

"I think they will, Comrade Major," said Spivak.

"Or maybe I'd better write about it to our regional paper *Molot*—by way of a suggestion?"

"It wouldn't do any harm."

"Isn't there anything else that needs shifting besides the railway station in Rostov, Ilya Trofimovich?" The question was put, with a little smile, by Major Kostromin, regimental C.O.'s political assistant, formerly instructor of the agricultural department of the Kalinin regional Party committee. "I made a stop in your town for several days in 1940 on my way South to a Black Sea resort. My impression of Rostov, I remember, was not very favourable. I had expected more. The South, I thought, the Don, Russia's granary—all the wharves and market places must be overflowing with fruits and melons. It was just in the height of the summer, August, and I started loosening my belt for your fruits and vegetables while I was still in the train coming down. But I didn't see much of a layout. I didn't overstuff myself with your watermelons. Just an ordinary market, like anywhere else—no more vegetables than up North. And the prices were pretty stiff, too, not collective farm prices. If you ask me, the city was rather poorly catered to. During the war I've been all over the Don around Rostov and seen with my own eyes what wonderful estates

you've got down there, what rich tracts of land are lying fallow on the lower reaches of the Don—there, right next to the city. Thousands of hectares of the richest soil going to waste. Irrigate it, put it under the plough and you'd get everything you want out of it—potatoes, tomatoes, melons—it would yield enough for ten cities like Rostov. Your meliorators on the regional administration are apparently slow movers.”

“The devil knows it, I never went in for agriculture, I couldn't say. I worked in the regional war office before the war. But I do remember that my wife was none too delighted with the markets, either. That's true. If I couldn't eat as many apples and grapes in the summer as I wanted to on my seven hundred rubles a month, my typist, with her two hundred and fifty couldn't complain of having too much of them either.”

“There'll be interesting conferences in the regions and districts after the war, when people come back from the front,” said Major Kostromin. “A lot of Communists will be coming back from the army. The Party organizations will swell immediately. There'll be something to talk about. We'll tell 'em about our successes, and they'll no doubt have something to say about the poor showing we made at the start, and pat us on the back for making up for it. The comrades who had been working in the rear will report what progress they've made. The times are such that you don't know what to marvel at more—the victories of the Red Army or the heroism of our gunsmiths, miners and collective farm women. It isn't so long since we marched through the Donbas—the region was in flames from end to end, it was a sight to unnerve the strongest. We thought it would take twenty years at least to rebuild it. Now you've got blast furnaces working already, and every day some other mine is put into operation. Not much is written in the papers about the Dnieper water power plant, but

I heard from a Ukrainian delegate at army headquarters—he had come to deliver gifts for the army—that they intended rebuilding it pretty fast, in two years, I think he said.

“Have any of you read about the Stalin Collective Farm, in the Alma-Ata Region, printed in the *Historical Journal*? Did you read it, agitator? You don’t say you missed it? It’s splendid material for one of your talks with the men. I think I’ve still got that issue somewhere. I’ll hunt it up and let you have it.

“For its achievements in wartime and contributions to war aid that collective farm has had its name entered in the chronicles of the Patriotic War, in the annals of history. It has multiplied its cattle herd, considerably extended its tillage lands—despite shortage of hands the women did all the work for the men who were called up to the army—made numerous contributions in money and food products to the national defence fund and armaments. The chairman of the farm personally donated a hundred thousand rubles for tank construction. The farm consists half of Kazakhs and half of Ukrainians who settled in Kazakhstan before the Revolution. Particularly remarkable was the way the farm treated evacuees. They took in four hundred and thirteen people evacuated from the western regions, and didn’t simply take them in but made them welcome, provided them with housing, food and work. In addition to that they take in a hundred and fifty to two hundred convalescent men discharged from war hospitals into the farm’s Rest Home every month.

“Now, can you have anything but a heartfelt ‘thanks’ to say to such collective farmers?

“Where things are done properly you can always expect ‘em to be done that way. But somebody’s going to get it in the neck for all those unploughed lands, for indifference to people’s needs and uncared-for invalids, if such cases crop up.”

Captain Sirtsov, regimental chief of staff, who had also recently returned from hospital, said:

"D'you know, Comrade Spivak, I noticed back home that some people go about dressed in a mixture of army uniform and civvies—army boots, khaki tunics, officer's belts, all that's missing are the shoulder straps. What's the idea? Is a man's work judged by his rig-up?"

Spivak said laughingly:

"In my district I saw the M.T.S. manager, a fellow named Romashenko. D'you know in what kind of toggerly he runs about the tractor brigades? A summer sports shirt, sandals worn on bare feet, a pimple cover like they wear down at the seaside—for all the world as if he were going out for a sun-bath instead of attending to the sowing campaign on a farm. But as for getting things done—if I were Kalinin, I'd award him the Order of Lenin for the way he's tackled the sowing campaign. Petrenko and I'll mention that too in our letter, Captain. We'll say: 'Don't encumber yourselves, comrades, with heavy jack boots and belts. Don't be shy: wear jackets, ties, shirts, drawers, derbys, top hats, anything you like, so long as you keep things going.'"

"That's right, agitator, go ahead!" boomed regimental C.O., slapping Spivak on the shoulder. "It's a good idea. Remind 'em that we'll be coming back soon and help 'em in the rebuilding job. Only please don't spoil my battalion C.O. with all your home reminiscences. I don't want him turned back into a farmer yet. There's my assistant, too, beginning to talk about melons. Though Petrenko's not the kind that goes soft. . . . I understand that you and he are both from the same district—the same collective farm even."

"Quite right, Comrade Major. Though lately we weren't working together—he was transferred to the District Land De-

partment and I to the District Party Committee, but our families were there and we didn't lose touch with the farm."

"Are your families alive—yours and his? I suppose they were evacuated when the Germans came?"

"Thanks, Comrade Major, they're alive and well. They've come back now, they're home. Does your wife write? Where is she—in Rostov?"

"She writes, but I can't make out how she's faring. My wife's so proud, you know. Even if she was badly off she'd never admit it. She writes that everything's in order, they've been bombed out of house and home and are living at her aunt's place. The children attend school in two shifts—one comes home from school and then gives the other one his boots to go to school in. She gets my army pay and is attached to a dining room. On the whole she doesn't complain—writes that everything's okay. Well, we'll see whether it's okay when we get home. If everybody's in the same boat I don't mind. But if it turns out that the family of the local fire brigade chief had a better time of it than the family of a regimental commander on active service, I'll have to ask the floor at that Party conference you were talking about, Comrade Kostromin. I won't do any chest-thumping, of course. Ever since the Civil War I never could stand the frontline fellows who went about blowing their own trumpet and smashing windows in private offices. I haven't much faith in those big heroics. When the war's over, mark my word, comrade officers, the biggest noise'll be made by the second and third echelons and not by the first-line fighting men.

"I'll say politely: 'My dear comrade, chief of the social insurance department, or whatever it's called. Come along, hand in your resignation. We'll see how my orderly, Sergei Lopukhov, will handle the business instead of you—the war's taught him a thing or two.' Provided, of course, that this here

chief showed as much concern for servicemen's families as I do, say, for Marshal Antonescu's health. But if he really did his level best under wartime conditions, that's a different matter. I'll shake his hand and even give him the loan of my Sergei to chuck the brawling tin heroes out of his office...."

The days flew by swiftly in battles and marches, and Spivak could not find time to rewrite the rough draft of the letter, which had swelled to the size of a novel. He would look through his notes with a shake of the head: 'By the time the military censorship gets through it with the magnifying glass according to the dictates of wartime regulations, and by the time it makes the railway journey the way I did, with twenty-four-hour stops at every wayside station, Mikola and I will get home on foot before Semyon Karpovich receives it.' He wanted to get everything he could into that letter. And every new talk with his comrades, every meeting with Petrenko meant so many new pages added to the letter.

The three years of war had made more of a soldier of Petrenko in his capacity of commanding officer of the fighting services, than of Spivak, and many of his thoughts and judgments were the thoughts and judgments of the army and the front.

"If some people there are horrified by the ruins," he said once, "and imagine that it will take years to restore what the Germans have destroyed, let's advise Semyon Karpovich to raise the spirits of the collective farmers like we here raise the spirits of the boys who haven't yet had their baptism of fire. We at the front have a better appreciation of how the country is helping the army. The Urals gives us our fighting equipment. The whole of Russia clothes and feeds us. We see here the whole lay of the land, we've got a view of things as

they are today and what they will be like tomorrow. You only have to look close.

“You know how it is with a young soldier—he may not be so young in years—when he finds himself for the first time at the front. He stands in the trenches with a rifle or a light machine gun—the night’s pitch dark, all around him bare steppe, here and there an observer on the lookout, not a sign of his own men on the right or left flanks and the enemy a couple of hundred feet away sending up flares—he stands gazing out in front of him, scared stiff, of course, imagining a German lurking behind every bush and thinking: ‘What the hell will I do with my machine gun and a couple of discs if the Germans suddenly take it into their heads to rush our positions with tanks and Ferdinands? All right, I’ll fire one of the discs, then the second—and then what? I won’t even have time to reload.’ Maybe some of the collective farm women think along the same lines—what can I do by myself with a spade and a cow against these weeds?

“The first thing you do is explain to the raw soldier what kind of assistance he will get and from what quarter, in case the Germans attack. You come up to one of these novices in the night, during your round of the posts, and say to him: ‘Don’t think you’re all alone here, young fellow, that we’ve set you here as a sacrifice to the Germans and forgotten all about you. You may think the steppe deserted, but the place is actually full of eyes and ears and hidden fire power. Our heavy machine guns are sited over there. The mortars are in that little grove. Further back is our artillery, all the regimental, divisional and corps batteries. They’re the kind of outfits that don’t necessarily have to stand in the front line, they’ll reach Jerry from where they are. But they’ve their eyes all over the place; there they are, the observers, standing next to you, in the same trench. If they see anything going on ahead on

your section they'll immediately pass the word to the battery by field telephone and those boys will put such a blast on you won't know whether you're standing on your head or your feet. They'll correct the aim too, you'll hear 'em—thirty right, twenty left. Somewhere further back are our Katyushas. And maybe divisional C.O. will bring out the aircraft if it looks like business—'let's have a squadron group of strafers, we've got some work for you to do.' D'you see how many assistants you fellows of the infantry have?"

"After a talk like that, and when you've laughed his fears away and given him permission to have a little smoke up his sleeve, the fellow'll immediately buck up.

"You've got to treat the collective farmers the same way. Put 'em wise as to the general dislocation, tell 'em who's going to help the Ukraine, and who is already doing so. The Urals will help—that's our long-range arsenal. Siberia will help. So far restoration work's being done under war conditions, but when all those plants that are turning out cannon and tanks for us now will go back to peacetime production can you imagine the number of tractors that'll be humming about the fields! How many cars will be coming back from the front! There'll be no need to keep all that technique locked up in the army after the war. We'll make Germany pay reparations for war damage. We'll make their prisoners build new factories in place of those they wrecked. And another thing you mustn't forget. How many hundreds of billions of rubles were we compelled to spend on defence since Hitler came to power and there was the smell of gunpowder in Europe? Though we weren't at war at the time we had to split our budget between tractors and harvesting combines and tanks and aeroplanes. But now, when we won't have the threat of war hanging eternally over our heads, we'll be able to put more funds into the country's economics. We'll get things going at such a rate after the war

that all the previous building records we had achieved under the five-year plans will look pale in comparison. That's what you've got to keep on explaining to the skirmish line infantry on the home front, the collective farm women, and you'll get 'em going into action with a grin."

Spivak knew his friend's taciturnity, his curt manner with his subordinates. Yes, Petrenko was capable of patiently explaining to a soldier the disposition of our troops, the battle array of the attacking units and the rank-and-file rifleman's place in the vast machinery of war in such a way that a man would square his shoulders with a sense of power, his hands grip his rifle more firmly and his eyes light up with fierce joy. Spivak remembered him not as the reticent, unsociable man the war had made him. He remembered Petrenko the agronomist chatting with the collective farmers, giving them fairy-like visions of the soil's fabulous prospects, his ardent speeches at meetings, his furious attacks against remiss members of farm boards and brigade leaders, his songs with the girls out in the field camps when the day's work was done. . . .

Don't believe the bluff and stern exterior that battalion commanders, sergeants, company officers—all of them ex-steel smelters, vine-growers, gold miners, surveyors, agronomists, music teachers, architects—wear at the front. Every man becomes a soldier in his own way. There are some people who make a resolution to drive all other thoughts from their minds till after the war. "O, ye soldiers who live by war! Read thou the Articles at bedtime o'er, and then on wakening read them once more." A man's chest would be covered with medals and decorations, the soles of his feet with horny callosities from thousand-mile marches, and himself seem to have grown callous and indifferent, but scratch him on the top and underneath you will still find him to be the architect he was, dreaming

of the hanging gardens of Semiramis in the Socialist cities of the future.

Petrenko was able to conceal and curb his feelings. Had it not been the fourth year of the war, with the army on the Carpathian threshold, Petrenko would doubtlessly have told Spivak, had he suggested the disturbing idea of writing that letter home. "Don't you think it advisable, Pavlo Grigorievich, to leave it alone for the time being?" As it was, it was he and not Spivak who first suggested writing the letter. That was because the war was entering on its fourth year and the army was standing on the threshold of the Carpathians....

"Semyon Karpovich may no doubt find it dull to be doing the same thing twice in his lifetime," Petrenko said on one occasion. "You've got to consider his feelings too. There's a man who has been stuck for fifteen years in one and the same district. He's put through collectivization once already, and organized the collective farms, and now he's obliged to rebuild the same farms again, get draft power from somewhere, set up dairy and stock farms, lay out new orchards. He used cows once for ploughing in the early days when the kulaks killed off their cattle, and now he's got to use cows again. Again the war against weeds, the acquisition of young livestock under contract from the State, the revival of crop rotations. The old story. But not quite. Nothing in life happens twice in exactly the same way. This is something new....

"One of our men, a Communist and an old partisan, who served in Budyonny's cavalry, asked me the other day: 'What is your opinion, Comrade Battalion Commander—what has this war done for us? Has it thrown us back or brought us nearer the aims we set ourselves—eternal peace and good-will among the peoples of the earth? I've seen what the Donbas looks like after the Germans,' he says, 'I've seen Zaporozhye and the

Dnieper power plant. Everything we built there under the three five-year plans has been smashed and ruined. Again we'll have to climb the ladder, step by step, I suppose?"

"It was a ticklish point he raised. That kind of question is in your line of handling. Anyway, I told him what I thought about it: 'No,' I said, 'we haven't been thrown back; we've forged ahead on the path of Lenin's teaching. Far ahead! Well, yes, we've witnessed terrible devastation. You've seen it, I've seen it, we've all seen it. Enormous labour will have to be put into the rebuilding of it. Rebuild we'll have to, you can't get away from it. But what d'you say to our having crushed the direst enemy of Socialism—fascism? Wouldn't you call that a victory of victories? A victory won before the eyes of the whole world? You realize, don't you, that we've already crossed the ditch of anti-Soviet feeling by which the world kept itself aloof from us? The world looks at us now with different eyes. With eyes of amazement. What kind of people are they, it thinks, who have broken the neck of Hitler before whom all Europe lay in the dust? English engineers and workers send us parcels with little notes in them—"To our Russian brothers." Wait till we get on top of the Carpathians,' I said, 'you and I'll get some view from there! What did we know of our fellow Slavs, our neighbours, before the war? We knew there was a Yugoslavia on the map, a Czechoslovakia and a Poland. We had a fight once with the Polish gentry—it was give and take. Of the Montenegrins we knew that they were a brave people and didn't submit even to Napoleon. We didn't know much. Now we're fighting shoulder to shoulder with these people for the same cause. D'you know who Marshal Tito is?' I asked him. 'Everybody's heard of him, every soldier of ours knows him like he knows his own Marshals Rokossovsky or Konev, and takes as much joy in his victories as he does in our own. No,' said I, 'let's take a

different view of our ruins. The Germans did not throw us back. They're not smart enough by a long chalk to turn back the wheel of history. Look how many brothers we've now got all over the world, we never had so many before. You know the proverb—friendship is dearer than money? Well, we've got the friends now and we'll have the money too.' "

"Yes, this is not the old story," agreed Spivak. "Certainly not! There's a farm team working at our place in the third brigade, they jokingly call it the Young Communist team—consisting of four old gammers—Domakha Fedorchenko's the youngest, she's sixty-eight. Last autumn they ploughed thirty hectares of fallow land and sowed forty hectares to corn. In the spring, when the first warm days set in, they went out and pitched tent in the fields, took a supply of food with them, rigged up a little brick stove, and took turns in shepherding the cows at night on the airfield. They stayed out there all the time, never came in to the village. Did that ever happen before? Why, those old women weren't even entered in the brigade lists, and they might be called in once in a blue moon at harvesting time to lend a hand with patching up the sacks. Even now they're not obliged to work, nobody has the right to make 'em. They could have given the cows to the youngsters to plough with. But no, these old women volunteered themselves. You couldn't even call 'em Stakhanovites. They won't think up anything new in agrotechnics and don't pretend to go in for record breaking. They simply plough and plough, from morn till night, without fag time—'Sook, sook!' They'd start adjusting one of the ploughs—'Here, Yavdokha! Come and undo this gadget, your old man was a blacksmith once upon a time.' They curse the Fritzes for having overworked the cows, which don't yield enough milk for the children. Start remembering their sons and grandsons and begin to cry, plod-

ding on all the time behind their ploughs. In the evening the check girl would measure the output—again the ‘young team’ had pulled off a hundred and fifty per cent!

“I spoke to Pasha Yushchenko, the tractor driver. Her husband was killed at Novorossiisk and her sister carted off to Germany. Her father’s been at the front ever since the outbreak of the war, but they haven’t had a single letter from him all the time. She’s now the best tractor driver in our brigade. I shouldn’t say she’s having an easier time than we out here. She works without a mate; starts the motor at peep of dawn and makes the grease run till night without a break, and if there’s a moon out she’d go on working all night if the brigade leader didn’t come up and throttle the engine and pull her off the seat. ‘What’s the idea, d’you want to fall asleep on the machine and crash into a ditch?’

“They have their old brigade leader, Ivan Breus, an invalid, the only exempted man left in the brigade. He’s a steady-going fellow. Just the right sort of man to get along with those girls. You know how it is with them. Something gets jammed in the motor, the crank won’t budge, yank it as she may, and the lass has her eyes already full of tears, or somewhere else the ignition goes wrong, the engine’s snorting on three valves, and when she starts unscrewing the fourth she gets a shock that sends her shrieking and she wallops the wheels with her spanner as if it were a cow.

“If the brigade leader’s a jumpy fellow in the bargain he’d sit down with ’em in a row and howl with misery. Breus is not that kind of fellow, you know. He’ll come up and say: ‘You’re hitting her in the wrong place, where the skin’s thickest; you won’t make her see any sense by smacking her in the wheels. Take a smack at the valves, that’ll do the trick!’ And they’d all begin to laugh just when they were ready to cry.

"As I was saying, I had a chat with Pasha. She told me: 'When you get the motor running smooth and the plough nicely adjusted and the weather's fine, with the moon shining, you ride up and down the steppe and don't feel a bit sleepy—and the thoughts you only think of during the night! You start remembering how we used to live before the war, and wondering—where are all our folks now? You dream of what life'll be like in twenty years' time when new people will have grown up. And you think of your own folks, think of them all the time. Dad must be alive, my heart tells me so, and Natasha must be yearning for us out there in Germany—they haunt me all the time. And you think of the accursed Germans.... You come up to the bone orchard, where skeletons are scattered all over the ground. Those are the Fritzes' carcasses. When they were billeted here they used to bury their soldiers on the village square facing the club house, but when the Red Army came we dug 'em up and threw them out on this cattle dump. Nobody wanted to dig a grave for them—we just flung 'em out on top and the dogs pulled 'em to pieces like carrion. I have to swing round at this spot, but I don't mind the waste of fuel and go crunching over their bones, crunching over the bones! Breus once noticed the tracks and said to me: 'What's the matter with you, Pasha, do you fall asleep on your machine that you go off the track?' 'Oh, no, Comrade Breus,' I said, 'I can't think of sleep.' And I told him. I thought he'd carry on about wasting fuel, but he was all right. 'Go on crunching 'em if it makes you feel easier,' he said. His own wife had her face bashed in with a pistol by a German officer, and the Germans burnt his house down. Thirty wounded Red Army men were lying in the cottage—it was used as a hospital. They were all burnt alive.'

"That's what she had to tell me. She ploughs nine hectares a day against the normal rate of four per shift. And the trac-

tor she works on is like Grampa Foma's push-can that he used to go about collecting scrap in—the front part off a droshky, the back part off a britzka. She assembled the thing with odd parts picked up here and there. The gearbox, when it starts going, shrieks like a 'Junkers 87' with a siren—you'd think it was going to fall to pieces any minute. She cut open the back wheels of an old tractor all down the rim with a point-tool to widen the rims of her own wheels for greater traction power. Can you imagine it, cutting that iron all round the circumference! I wonder how many times she hit herself on the thumb! The regional newspaper gave her a write-up. I suppose that issue reached the front lines, because a guardsman she'd never known wrote her a letter—I saw it myself—saying: 'When I go home I'll drop in to see you, Comrade Yushchenko, and give you my guards' badge—you've earned it.' Did that ever happen before? That's not an old story, certainly not! Sorrow and blood and ruins all around—yet new powers are surging up in the people. What fools the Germans were! What did they bargain for? Ten Hitlers won't lead the people off the path the Bolsheviki have brought them out on. When they started hanging Stakhanovites—guardsmen began to crop up. You gave that soldier the right answer, Mikola. These new powers will take us far ahead. We've got more friends abroad now and less of that class of people at home with the 'it-has-nothing-to-do-with-me' mentality. Everybody now is put on his mettle. There used to be one Stakhanovite in the family—now they're all out for becoming Stakhanovites—aunts and uncles, and nephews...."

Petrenko was not a common-garden agronomist. He was an intensive farming specialist. Perhaps that is why, knowing how much latent power lies within the earth and how many extra billions of people it could sustain, he was particularly

alive to the Germans' mendacious cries about the crowded state of the world. The Germans wanted *Lebensraum*. The lands of the *Bolshevik* collective farm, his farm, on which he had grown up and worked—three thousand hectares—had once belonged to a landowner, a single family. The collective farmers—three hundred families—took possession of these lands. It was enough for them all, and it would be enough a hundred years, two hundred years hence, when there would perhaps be two or three times more people. The land is capable of yielding fabulous harvests. Farmers can create new plants themselves and control their growth without fear of the elements, like a worker in the factory controls the operation of his machine. This was not merely a dream to Petrenko. He was convinced it would be so. He had done it himself. Who was it in Germany, crazed with envy of the riches enjoyed by the Soviet people, who complained of insufficient "space"?

Every good agronomist has his hobby. One studies the best means of restoring the disrupted structure of the soil, another spends his life in battling with weeds and advocates fallows, while a third pleads the cause of grassland crop rotations.

Petrenko looked into the future. He was not carried away by sweeping expanses of ploughed fields, the absolute figures of crop yields or scales of production. He knew that the steppe latitudes were not boundless. The sight of an immense field of wheat in the ear, promising, by usual standards, a fair harvest, impressed him less than a single square metre of land on which the plants grew in such rich profusion and the ears were so heavy and full that one could say at a glance that this square metre, at the present level of agricultural science, had yielded the utmost it could give. Petrenko knew that common fallow and green fallow and fertilizers were agrotechnical "novelties" of thousand-year-old standing, the ABC of ag-

ronomy. Real scientific farming begins where man creates the plants he wants himself.

Had Petrenko worked on an experimental farm he would probably have devoted all his life to cultivating some unique perennial rootstock species of sunflower with a disk the size of a cart wheel, or a potato and tomato hybrid bearing fruit both from its tubers and overground stems.

But he worked on a collective farm. He was a practical agronomist. It was his business to maintain the vast area under crops—three thousand hectares—in proper order. He had to be satisfied with the customary average of agrotechnical requirements. He controlled the depth of ploughing, cleaned and tested the seeds for germination, drafted the sowing and harvesting plans for the different brigades and combated pests. Nevertheless he had several small lots carved out of the vast acreage on which he demonstrated to the collective farmers the rich promises of tomorrow. He was impatient to look into the future.

He thrice raised the question of purchasing an artificial rain apparatus at the collective farm general meetings, till he finally received the necessary funds, bought the apparatus and had it delivered to the collective farm.

He had his "Elijah the Prophet," as the farm women christened this contrivance, mounted in the steppe by a pond, and watered five hectares of winter-wheat, reaping a yield of four hundred and fifty poods per hectare.

Petrenko found men and women members of the farm in each brigade capable of renouncing old habits and taking a serious view of such business as selecting seeds by hand for the experimental plots, the transplanting of wheat, and the keeping of records of the number of sprouts per hectare. He had these collective farmers organized in special groups which he called Stakhanovite agrotechnic teams. They collected ferti-

lizers and conveyed them to the fields, fed the plants several times throughout the summer on various nutritive compounds, and were careful to avoid letting the corn fall from the ear at reaping time. The crop yield in the plots worked by these teams was invariably from one and a half to two times higher than the general farm yield.

Petrenko became the central figure of a group of restless, seeking, daring collective farmers who were not altogether satisfied with what the present day had to offer them. He pushed through new and lucrative cultures for field cultivation, rebelled against the traditional winter idleness and devised ways and means of employing idle hands in subsidiary farm work.

The collective farm was rich in land, but a single square metre of untilled soil would make him furious. Petrenko, with the help of the farm girls, planted flower beds around the brigade field camps; he sowed honey crops between the rows of the farm orchard and made the farm members take young fruit trees from the nursery and plant them in the courtyards and streets facing their cottages.

He was an agronomist to the marrow of his bones, a collective farm enthusiast and a lover of his profession which he never dreamt of changing for anything else.

Petrenko was seven years Spivak's junior, both in years and Party record. In 1930 he was still a member of the Young Communist League and his first years of employment on the collective farm were spent in the capacity of messenger. It was the collective farm that had sent him to an Agricultural Institute to complete his education, with the stipulation that he would return to the farm. He left the farm with great reluctance just before the war, at the beginning of 1941, having been recommended for the post of Chief Agronomist of the District Land Department by Serdyuk, the Secretary of the

District Party Committee, who had not long before taken on his staff the Party organizer of the same farm, Spivak.

Petrenko had not had time to achieve much at his new post. He had merely made himself acquainted with the collective farms of the district which he had not had occasion of visiting before, carried through one sowing campaign and secured a decision by the District Party Committee and Executive Committee for the construction of a big inter-farm irrigation canal.

In June the war broke out. He was obliged to change his profession.

He had not made a great hit as a soldier during his three years in the army, though his age, which was neither too old nor too young, and his education, gave him good opportunities for promotion.

He began his fighting career as company Sergeant, in which rank he had been demobilized in peacetime after having served his term of military service; then he became platoon commander, being appointed to the rank of Junior Lieutenant; after his first wound he received a company and the rank of Lieutenant, and after his second wound and a course of officers' training he was given command of a battalion and another star to his shoulder straps. He had no luck with his promotion papers, which either disappeared together with headquarters to which they were sent when he broke through enemy encirclement, or were returned through some oversight on the part of the personnel clerk whose duty it was to prepare these documents, or he was too modest to remind his superiors that the lawful term for receiving his next rank was long overdue. One need not necessarily be a gifted strategist to earn the rank of major or lieutenant colonel after three years of war. Indeed, he might have made a good regimental commander. "The clerks had let him down"—as they say in the army.

Spivak and Petrenko had not been together all the time. On the Stalingrad front they had fought in different divisions and had not known anything of each other until they met again in the Donbas in the spring of 1943, in army reserves, after having both been discharged from hospital. There, on their mutual request, they received their assignment for duty in the same regiment.

Petrenko was a strict and exacting officer. He became that way after his first battle, when he saw what war was like and what the art of leading grey-coated men through fire and water consisted in. To keep men in their places when tanks are creeping down on their trenches, or to get them into action under a hail of bullets, when little hollows offer such a blessed refuge and it seems that no power on earth can get them up from the ground, it is, of course, important that the men should know what they are fighting for, but no less important is iron discipline instilled by a proper period of drill and training and barrack life. There must be a sense of absolute obedience to the commanding officer, strong enough to prevail over a man's instinct of self-preservation and become a second, and the stronger, instinct with him.

Having, as the result of several unfortunate experiences, thoroughly realized the importance of discipline in the army, Petrenko made it a point, day and night, during battle and relaxation, in bivouac or on the march, of sustaining it in all the units under his command. He had eyes for everything, he never missed or condoned a private's dirty mess-tin when he lined up at kitchen for his meal, the perfunctory pose of a platoon commander when issuing orders, a soldier's foot-wrappings lying on a table in a dugout beside a loaf of bread, or the slightest slovenliness of dress in men and officers. He never tired of pulling men up and making reprimands, not in a nagging way, through clenched teeth—but vehemently, with

a sense of deep conviction that a flap on a soldier's coat sewn on crooked might affect the issue of tomorrow's engagement.

Always stern, with an unsmiling countenance, he laughed for the first time on overhearing a conversation between two young sergeants—he was company C.O. at the time. One of the men was saying:

“Blimy, he doesn't arf keep his weather eye open, that Junior Lieutenant of ours! He spotted something wrong in the way Kozlov's machine gun was mounted, twenty yards off, in the night. He wouldn't miss a fly. What a guy! I guess his mis-sus had a lot to put up with. I bet you he stuck his nose into the soup pot to check up how many 'taters she'd put in and made sure the onion was being fried according to regulation. It's queer, you know, Kuzmenko, but wherever I am or whatever I'd be doing I have a feeling that Company C.O.'s somewhere behind staring me in the back.”

That's where it was—the instinct. Petrenko, however, laughed not because he had achieved his end. It was at the thought of his home and his wife. The Sergeant was mistaken. He had never pried into his wife's saucepans, had never checked her household budget, nor paid any attention to the clothes she bought. On the contrary, his wife made him shave, she did his tie for him on holidays, adjusted the ends of his shirt beneath the belt and was continually grumbling about the books, fag ends, seed samples in test tubes, fishing tackle and hunting gear littered about the house.

The new recruits who came to Petrenko's battalion did not immediately assess the rather plain-looking figure of their C.O. at its true worth. At first they merely stood in fear of him, on account of his perpetual carping and grumbling. The men would gladly go two hundred metres out of their way to make a detour of his dugout. He would find rust stains on the cleanest rifle, and for an insufficiently slick round-about-

turn on the part of a dismissed private, he would summon the man's officer and make him put him through his paces, right there at C.P. Then the men began to wonder—when did he sleep and relax, that restless C.O. of theirs? It pleased Petrenko to astonish his company commanders and men with his truly amazing staying power and constant vigilance, on the reasonable assumption that such qualities raise an officer's authority in the eyes of his subordinates. During defensive actions there wasn't a night in which he did not repeatedly raise every company on the field telephone, enquiring what the situation was, while the next day those same signalmen, runners and observers would see him up and about, visiting the companies, measuring the depths of the trench communication passages and checking gun-points and the laying of the batteries till late in the evening.

Then things began to dawn on the uninitiated, when casualties in other outfits, whose officers were not so exacting, became known, or when a scout party had brought in a prisoner from a Hun-pinching raid who testified that the area lying between the railway booth on the right and the grove on the left—which were the positions occupied by the Second Battalion—were considered by the Germans to be impenetrable for reconnaissance, and that the German officers had a very high opinion of the Soviet officers who had set up these positions. And the men began to feel respect for their battalion C.O., the respect and gratitude with which a son, grown wise with experience, pays tribute to a father's stern upbringing in youth.

The last time they had fought a long defensive action was in the spring of 1943, in the Donbas. No outfit had dug so many miles of communication passages, such deep and solidly-built bomb-shelters, as had Petrenko's battalion. Nowhere were the dugouts so spotlessly clean and the trenches,

to all intents and purposes, so utterly deserted that no heads, except those of the observers, could be seen above the breast-work in the daytime.

The shirts of the men digging the ground in the night were drenched with their sweat. Petrenko walked up and down the trenches like a foreman on a building job, with a tape-measure in his hand, grunting an approval to "Stakhanovites" who had overfulfilled the tasks he had laid down and ordering extra assignments to those who hadn't. The men cursed the "lull" and Senior Lieutenant Petrenko in the same breath. They yearned for offensive action and marches. Be that as it may, the battalion, during four months on the forward fringe, paid toll to the enemy's bombings, artillery bombardments and machine-gun fire with no more than six casualties—two killed and four wounded. During the same time Petrenko's snipers alone picked off sixty-eight Germans. These figures were published in the frontline newspaper and many old-timers kept the cutting with the picture of their C.O. to show their wives when they got home: "You've got him to thank, my dear, for seeing me home alive."

It somehow happened that Petrenko received fewer awards than any of the other old battalion commanders in the regiment—a "For Defence of Stalingrad" medal and the Order of the Red Star, while others had two or three Orders each. This was another case of being "let down by the clerks." Possibly he was himself to blame, for being so reserved and unsociable, for being so unobtrusive, for his aversion to boasting in reports and dispatches.

However, despite his modest awards, Major Goryunov would have liked nothing better than to have all his battalion commanders shaped after the same pattern as Petrenko. No matter how tense the situation was he could always rely on

the Second Battalion, knowing that Petrenko would commit no reckless blunders, would not risk leaving the battalion without a commander at the critical moment of the battle by needlessly endangering his own life, would not retreat unless ordered to, neither in the face of Panthers, nor Tigers; would not call for reinforcements unless in an extremity, would not fling his men slap-bang in a frontal attack against an enemy pillbox if there was any chance of manoeuvring, or unless his artillery would answer the purpose; and in pressing home an attack he would pursue the enemy hotfoot, not losing contact either by day or night, in fog or rain, along muddy impassable roads, when horses have to be unharnessed from the guns and the guns pulled along by sheer man-strength and when the soldiers carrying trench mortars and the parts of heavy machine guns on their shoulders have to be relieved every hundred yards.

Possessing no natural genius for military leadership that might have brought him to prominence in the fighting service, Petrenko nevertheless was able, by sheer strength of purpose and by banishing from his heart and mind all thoughts and feelings irrelevant to the conduct of war, to make himself an efficient executive of other men's great and inspired designs, a disciplined commanding officer, indefatigable in his pursuit of order and organization, and well versed in military tactics. When he answered his country's call Petrenko became a real soldier, hardened to withstand the longest strain, capable of self-sacrifice and imperishable deeds no less than the humdrum, jog-trot and thankless labour of frontline life. What more could be expected of a one-time agronomist, an enthusiast of intensive farming, a man of a live and noble peacetime calling?

IT WAS NIGHT, another night like that at the village of Lipitsa. The sky was aglow with flares and the coloured embroidery of tracer bullets. High above the earth the first batch of long-distance night bombers droned their way out to enemy territory. The frogs croaked loudly in the marshes. Nightingales sang in a grove nearby.

But this night Petrenko was not making preparations for an attack. A temporary halt in the offensive had been called. For three days the men had been building fortifications in the hilly terrain which, with its deep gullies and woods, reminded one of the Donbas. They hacked at the stony ground, felled pine trees for roofing the dugouts, washed their underwear in the limpid streams flowing at the bottom of the ravines, shaved, bathed, swore at the Germans for the sudden bursts of gunfire that disturbed the stillness and admired the Carpathians looming blue in the distance.

The men from the Kuban and Caucasus said that the Carpathians reminded them of the Caucasian mountains, those from the Urals claimed that they looked like the Ural ridge, while the Siberians found that they resembled Khamar-Daban, near Lake Baikal.

Columns of trucks were coming up from the rear with shells, mountaineering and pack equipment, foodstuffs and fresh troops.

Spivak and Petrenko lay on the trench rampart gazing out to the West where a narrow strip of light still shone on the horizon. The men at the front always look West. It has become a habit. Over there were the towns and villages waiting to be liberated. Over there was the enemy who had to be constantly watched. There, in the West, the evening skies long reflect the glow of distant conflagrations.

Petrenko was unusually talkative and excited that night, a fact which made Spivak feel dimly anxious. At the war all men grow somewhat superstitious, and sometimes, much against their own will and ashamed to admit it even to their nearest friends, they would give credence to premonitions, dreams and signs. Perhaps Petrenko, who was tired out and had not eaten anything all day since morning was a bit under the influence of the vodka he had taken at supper, or perhaps it was the intuition that he would not see many more nights like this.

Spivak had dreamt the previous night that he was wandering down a road littered with the carcasses of horses and human corpses, all alone, like a straggler of a marching company. He had sat down to take a rest on a pile of shell cases, lit a cigarette, wondering at the silence and the deserted road, which, judging from the smouldering remains of carts and machines, had a few minutes before been the scene of a fierce battle.

"I'm not a muzhik, Pavlo Grigorievich," Petrenko was saying. "Though I love the steppe and peasant's labour and nature, I'm not a muzhik. I've tested myself. I get pleasure out of listening to the noise of a big factory and machines, it's like music to me. When the drivers in the tractor brigade used to start their engines of a morning and all five of them started throbbing and humming, it gave me a real thrill. I'd heard it a hundred times, yet it always affected me the same

way. I was in the Donbas once before the war, when the place was alive with the clang of iron and smoke pouring out of all the stacks. It was a thrilling sight! I looked at the factory and thought—what a link it establishes between people. Take an old workman who has been thirty years on the job—what's he got his heart in? In his work shop, his blast furnace, his shaft. And what did the peasant in the old days have his heart in? He had it in his corn shed, his pigsty, his cottage, fenced off and ditched off and drawn round with barbed wire. I detest the peasant's kennel, Pavlo Grigorievich. We didn't live so bad before the Revolution. We had a farm, land and horses. And what did greed do to our family? You know our family. What did my brother Petro go to the dogs for in Siberia? D'you remember how keen he was on becoming that kulak Dudnik's son-in-law?"

"I do. He wanted to marry Marfa, that epileptic scarecrow."

"Yes, epileptic, a half-wit, blind of one eye and deaf into the bargain. I wonder how he would have lived with her—probably would have committed suicide. Old Dudnik had a brick house, five teams of oxen, and Marfa was the only heir-ess. It was over the house and the oxen that he killed Andrei Babich, his rival. They had a fight, and he fetched him a blow over the head with a spade—split it right open. And then he wanted to hang himself. Sat in the woods under a tree twining a rope. Ever since he was sent to Siberia in 1912 we haven't had a single letter from him. And my eldest brother, Stepan, the peasants all but killed over the division of the land—he went about spitting blood for three years after it. And father over-ate himself on the market with sour milk and gave up the ghost. That's how the street urchins came to be teasing us 'Souries.' I used to be called 'Mikola Sourie' till I was married. Dad took sour milk and pork sausage up to Pol-

tava to sell on the market in 1919—you remember the time the government was combating profiteering. Somebody on the market started yelling: 'Look out, fellows! There's a confiscation raid!' Better than lose the stuff Dad drank ten pitchers of sour milk and ate close on twenty pounds of sausage. He died on the britzka as soon as they got out of town. Some of the neighbours brought him home dead. Mother wailed over him: 'Oi, Ilya, Ilya, what have you gone and done! You've got children, you've got little ones! Who's going to feed the cattle now, who's going to till the land for us?' The land, yes.... I don't suppose your Dad, Pavlo Grigorievich, taught you how a good farmer should plough his land—by overlapping his neighbour's strip? You didn't go out at night to move the pegs on the field boundaries?"

"We had nothing to plough, worse luck, and nothing to do the ploughing with."

"Well, we had.... A hut can be a kennel not merely because it has toads sitting under the benches and wood-lice crawling over the walls. A fine house can be a kennel too. D'you remember the Boichenko farmstead, with five houses on the Poltava road? It was a pretty homestead with iron-roofed houses and poplar trees, and brick-walled gardens. If you'd be on your way home and got caught in a snowstorm you could save yourself the trouble of turning in at that farmstead. So many rooms in the houses that you'd never make yourself heard—the devil himself knows where they slept. You could shout and curse and plead until you cried—not a dog would let you in for the night—stay out and freeze.... A kennel just the same! If it hadn't been for collectivization, what would I have been, Pavlo Grigorievich? Of what use would my Y.C.L. membership have been to me, dabbling on my own bit of farm? Be your own agronomist? I'd have buried myself in it like a muckworm and have forgotten what

I joined the Y.C.L. for. Didn't we have tuft-hunters in the villages those days who were kicked out of the Party as kulaks? Once he'd got at the land and pulled a couple of crops out of it and had some luck in livestock, his appetite would be wetted for more, he'd start renting more patches off widows and employ farm labourers on the quiet, making out they were his relations. He'd carry a Party card in his pocket, but scratch his skin and you'd find a damned hidebound kulak underneath. Who knows, I might have ended up that way if collectivization had come ten or fifteen years later than it had...."

"The further off we get from the '30's," Petrenko resumed after a long pause, "the more obvious does it become what a hill we have breasted by setting up the collective farms. We made a thumping success of it! Brigades, teams, training courses, meetings. We've waked the muzhik up, dragged him out of his kennel. What talents have been discovered in the people! How many good folks have been saved from a hideous fate!"

That night Spivak did most of the listening, while Petrenko spoke.

"Write this down too, Pavlo Grigorievich. People died for Socialism in 1905, they sacrificed their lives for it in 1917. For Socialism Lenin and Stalin spent their best years in exile. And now, the blood that is being shed, is shed for Socialism.... We've been through the whole of Ukraine, but we haven't seen any collective farms. We won't have time to see them revive. We're only brief visitors here. The fires in the villages haven't been extinguished yet and we get new orders—'Prepare to swing out.' And we're out on the trail again. But people ask us: 'How are we going to begin? Will there be collective farms again, or what?' The Germans tried to fool them into believing that we started wearing shoulder straps

because the old tsarist order was being restored in Russia. Our reply is: 'Yes, you're going to have the collective farms. There's going to be the Soviet government, the collective farms, the M.T.S., you'll speak at your meetings, send your children to the universities, your Stakhanovites will go up to Moscow and see Stalin—everything will be as it was before the Germans barged in.' We say that and move on to the West. The rest is your business, my friends. Our business is to liberate people and tell them: 'It's going to be!'—and you set about it quickly, rebuilding Soviet life...."

It was unusually quiet on the forward lines. There was not a single rocket from the German positions, not a single round of machine-gun fire. Spivak and Petrenko lay for a long time on the cool soft earth thrown up from the newly dug trench. There was no need to hide behind the breastwork—not a single bullet whistled overhead. They might have been lying, not at the front, but at home, in the field, or resting on a hunting outing, or relaxing after the day's work in the collective farm brigade—so peaceful was everything around, as if the Germans had withdrawn, under cover of night, from the positions they occupied in the daytime and retired to the hills. But they hadn't. The skirmish line of the battalion, half a kilometre ahead, reported by telephone that they could distinctly hear the Germans talking in the trenches about a hundred metres in front, the clinking of mess-tins and the sounds of singing and mouth-organs.

The friends spoke for a long time about their collective farm, about acquaintances at home and about the letter to the Secretary of the District Party Committee.

"It's time we wound up, Mikola," said Spivak at length. "How long can we go on writing? You can't get it all off at one go anyway. If we manage to keep safe and sound we'll write some more afterwards, maybe. Let's finish up this way:

'Don't worry about personnel, Semyon Karpovich, like Nikitchenko does over his oxen, for being so few—we'll be coming back soon and give you a hand.' And let's tell him what kind of people we've got out here, and what a bunch'll be pouring back from the front when the war's over.

"We can't sing the frontliners' praises too loudly, 'cause we're frontliners too, and that would be singing our own praises—but there's no harm in saying that decent boys will be coming back. Out of your battalion alone we could choose collective farm chairmen and brigade leaders enough for three districts. And what chairmen! One fellow's got so used to living in the fresh air you couldn't keep him in the office if you were to glue him down to his chair. Another stands shaking his head over the trenches and anti-tank ditches thinking—how many Ferghana canals we could have dug if not for the war! A third drowned a bunch of *polizei* and collaborationists in the Dnieper when they stood on the left bank waiting their turn to be ferried across, and thought—'where the hell did all this scum come from? How is it we didn't notice 'em before?' All have been close neighbours with death, yet all are thinking about life. There'll be some coming back like poor old Razumovsky, to find neither home, nor wife, nor children. What are you going to do with them? How are you going to buck them up? With work, of course. But the kind of work that'll make a man forget himself, that'll make him feel all the time that he's still fighting. They can do a lot, these poor devils. They can cut up rough from misery, but they can do a lot of good if they get into the right hands. Even Krapivka, that son of a gun, when he's had his blow-off on meat patties, will stop counting the amount he could have eaten and drunk before the war and begin to think about the amount of extra work he could have put in in that Leather Repair *Artel* of his.

"You were talking about dislocation, Mikola. You forgot

to mention another of the big guns—the frontliners. This force will probably step into the rebuilding business last of all, when we've put things in order on the frontiers and across the frontiers, but they'll come in with a punch, you bet. . . .

“Or perhaps we'd better not write about the frontliners, not to give him a loophole for easing up? Let him not depend upon us, and look out for people on the spot. Dash it, they're not so bad off for personnel after all. You can find good people for practically any job. But you've got to advance them like Comrade Stalin advances his marshals. Look how many new names have cropped up since the war. Men who commanded regiments and battalions at the beginning of the war are now commanding armies, fronts.

“You can't live all the time on memories of what used to be—that famous tractor brigade leader we had, Semyon Gridas, or that collective farm chairman, Mikita Lyashenko who was twice awarded the exhibition gold medal. Gridas is now in command of a tank brigade, and Mikita is political department chief of a guardsmen's motorized division. Gnatenko, the well-known Ukrainian girl farmer and record holder, is now a captain of the Red Army. D'you want her to go back to her beet farming? People whom the Party will, after the war, leave in possession of big posts won't go back. And the dead will not rise. We've got to get used to new names. If not Lyashenko, very likely Ilyushenko will turn out to be a splendid collective farm chairman, and Pasha Yushchenko instead of Gridas will achieve a new seasonal output record on a tractor.

“And you too, Mikola, if you fail to find Marina alive in Germany, will find other girls for experimental field work just as good. D'you know the kind of woman Olga Rudchenko turned out to be—the one from Marina's team? D'you know what she did under the Germans? First of all, she took care of the

farm's Perpetual Land Tenure Deed. She went into the farm office just before the Germans came, and found all the files and documents scattered over the floor—not much to our chairman's credit, leaving things in such a state. Seeing the Deed in red covers among the litter of papers, she hid it in her bosom, burnt the Party and Y.C.L. lists—a non-Party woman, mind you—and picked out a few more important documents. And she kept that Deed safely hidden in her house till our people came back. She rescued three wounded Red Army men during the German occupation. Hid 'em in a hole under the cow stall in a shed for two months, gave them food and drink and dressed their wounds until they were able to get on their feet; then she conducted them out of the village at night and told them how to get to the partisans. That's a fact. Babeshko told me the story himself. Those men were in his partisan detachment. He recommended her to partisan headquarters for an award. Some nerve that woman's got!

“The women told me how she started a big argument with a German over the farm's name. A motorcyclist passing down the street stopped near her house, and drawing a map out of his pocket, tried to give her to understand that he wanted to know what place it was. *Bolshevik Collective Farm*, she says. ‘How's that?’ the fellow says—under the Germans the farm was known as Alexeyevka Community No. 2. ‘What I'm saying—the *Bolshevik*.’ The German reached for his holster, but Olga, nothing daunted, took a peep at his map. ‘What are you getting mad for, Herr officer? You've got it written down there on the map yourself—*Bolshevik Collective Farm*. (The map was probably a duplicate of ours, with the place names in German and Russian.) I gave you the right name, Sir. Now that road there leads to *Red Partisan Farm*. If I told you Community No. 2, you wouldn't be no wiser. It'd put you on the wrong trail. There isn't any such name on

your map.' He rolled up the map, hit her in the face with it and rode off to the *Red Partisan*, while she stood laughing at him.

"D'you think that woman won't be able to wangle money out of the farm board for buying superphosphates or getting oxen from the stockfarm to work your experimental lots? Nobody appointed her as team-leader. The very first day the collective farm was reorganized she got all Marina's girls together and trooped off with them to Kozinsky's vegetable garden—the collaborationist elder under the Germans—to dig up his potatoes for the Red Army donations fund. And on the eve of the spring sowing, while the local administrators were still arguing the problem as to whether, considering the shortage of draft power and labour, it was preferable to go in for quantity or quality tillage, she was the first person in Alexeyevka to start collecting ash and bird manure. She solved the question short and clear: 'If you can't give us horses we'll carry all the fertilizers out on our backs.' And they did. Now all they talk about in her team is Marina. Olga keeps on telling the girls: 'Now, girls, let's do things properly and help the Red Army to free our Marina.'

"Those women, girls and old men, Mikola, are capable of working wonders. They'll buckle down to the job and put through the sowing, weeding and harvesting campaigns better than it used to be done in our days. If we're held up a bit in Europe and don't get back so soon they'll prepare us a surprise so that we won't believe our own eyes. We'll look at the collective farms and say: 'Good heavens, when did you manage all this? D'you know how many calves we have already at the dairy-stock farm? A hundred and fifty. Young 'uns, sucklers, but enough of 'em to call a farm. They'll be cows in two years. By the time we've been getting to the Carpathians every little calf's grown to half a cow....

"According to the country custom we ought to have started the letter with personal regards. I'm sorry, but I clean forgot about it. We'll have to leave 'em for the end. Folks at the farm sent you so many regards and greetings that I told them: 'Why, I'll have such a mouthful of greetings for him I'll have to turn it over and play the other side.'

"Olga Rudchenko sends you her regards. She wanted to send you a bottle of champagne—as a matter of fact she dived into the hole to fetch it, but there was only one left which she's keeping for Kuzma. Fenya Kuleshova sends you greetings on behalf of the whole kitchen garden brigade. Luka Gavrilovich sends you his warmest greetings. So does Nikitchenko, and Fedchenko, the Chairman of the District Executive Committee. They remember us kindly there, Mikola. Olga said: 'It's a pity Mikola Ilyich is not here. I've pledged myself to harvesting 20 centners of sunflower seed per hectare—I wouldn't risk more, but if he was here I'd have signed up for 30. We haven't had any proficiency courses and study circles for two years and have forgotten all he taught us about phosphorus and potash and chromosomes. Maybe what we learned is out of date now, maybe some Stakhanovites in places where the Germans hadn't been have discovered new methods of raising crop-yields of which we know nothing.'

"When your wife Nastya came back from Alma-Ata to an empty cottage all the women on the farm clubbed together to help her out with household things—one woman brought a bucket, one a saucepan, another a couple of spoons, or something for the children to wear. They were pretty helpful to Oxana too. She didn't even have a home. Panas Gorbach lived in our cottage under the Germans, and when they started retreating he set it on fire, the skunk. The roof was burnt off but the walls were intact. They fixed up a new roof, put in doors and windows—everything's okay now. When I came home

I didn't recognize the old place—the yard looked like mine but the cottage didn't. Mine was thatched with rushes, this one had a tiled roof. I knocked at the door and Oxana opened it—so I guessed it was mine. . . .”

Had it not been so dark Spivak would have seen his friend's eyes glistening with tears, as he lay beside him on the breastwork chewing a blade of grass. Possibly, their glistening was due to the darkness and the fact that nobody could see it. . . .

Mastering his emotion and clearing the lump in his throat with a cough, Petrenko said:

“Yes, there's just one more thing I want you to write down, Pavlo Grigorievich—about the subsidiary branches. Tell 'em not to neglect the small things like fishing, berry gathering, sericulture and bee-keeping. No matter how bad off they may be for working hands, they'll always find enough old men and invalids on any farm who are unfit for field work. Let 'em make use of them on these domestic jobs. You've got to bear in mind all the business sides of the farm. It means an extra ten or maybe hundred thousand rubles' income. Of course corn and cattle's the main job, the first echelon you might say, but they've got to keep the rears up to scratch.”

Spivak, taking a runner with him to guide him to the Third Battalion, left Petrenko at one a.m. The men had not yet had time to dig continuous communication passages to all regimental positions. The Germans would not suffer the men to walk about openly in the daytime in front of their trenches. The most convenient time for meeting people in the battalions and companies was in the night. That was generally the case in newly-occupied defensive positions—the working hours of practically all the officers and men were at night, when special vigilance was called for. Relaxation was taken, by turns, in the daytime.

Spivak got no further than the Battalion C.P. where the C.O., Captain Solovyov, treated him and his political assistant, Senior Lieutenant Kalugin, to a mug of cold, thick, cream-like milk. Solovyov was a thrifty officer and kept a milking cow that he had captured from the Germans, which followed him in the baggage train ever since they had passed the old frontiers. The first thing he did when regimental staff officers paid him a visit was to treat them to a pint mug of milk from his own "dairy", invariably, as the convivial host, quaffing a similar mug himself. He also had a travelling "kitchen garden" in the shape of a box of planted spring onions which made its journeys on the cook's cart. Spivak was not given the opportunity of banqueting on the onions, though the hospitable battalion commander had already winked to his orderly. At 1.45 an action started on the left flank in the vicinity of the Second Battalion.

Solovyov came out of his dugout, and after listening a while to the sounds of bursting mortar shells and machine-gun spatter, said:

"Three hundred four five. The very spot. Petrenko's getting it. Cutting off the appendix."

Spivak knew what he meant. Petrenko's battalion occupied a spearhead position of tactical advantage on a height that wedged into the enemy's disposition. By attacking Osadchi's and Belov's companies on the flanks the Germans apparently hoped to bottle up the wedge, hedge in and destroy the battalion on the height and entrench themselves there, unless the artillery bombardment and the chattering of the machine guns that had just broken out meant the beginning of a bigger operation. The firing now extended further down the lines in the vicinity of the First Battalion, and on the right flank in the vicinity of the neighbouring regiment. Possibly the Germans, having brought up reinforcements, were counter-attacking along

the whole line of the division. If so, why was it so quiet in the Third Battalion?

The conference of agitators and Party organizers had to be abandoned. Spivak telephoned to Major Kostromin at headquarters and asked whether he could go back to Petrenko's battalion.

"No," replied Kostromin. "I'm going to Petrenko myself. You won't be able to get through to him now. Stay where you are. You folks keep awake too."

"What's on there at Petrenko's show, Comrade Major?" asked Spivak.

"Fighting. Things are serious. The Germans are coming on like hell. Haven't any details yet. I'll find out when I get there. Rodionov's killed."

"No? How'd it happen?"

"Don't know. They just reported killed. The wire's dead for some reason. Well, I'm off. So long!"

A little later on the reports from neighbouring outfits made it clear that the moderate artillery and mortar bombardment in those areas was merely a diversion caused to conceal the enemy's main objective in starting that night action, which was the attack against Height 304.5

"That dead lull when you're in defence never bodes any good," said Captain Solovyov. "They were suspiciously stingy with their ammunition since the evening."

Though things were still quiet at the Third Battalion's positions one had to look out for unpleasant surprises, especially on the left flank, in the event of the Germans trying a deeper enveloping movement of the height.

Solovyov and Kalugin went to the companies. Spivak remained at C.P. at the telephone.

He waited another hour—the thinning sky could be seen through the slits of the tent covering the entrance to the dug-

out—and then raised headquarters on the phone again. Captain Sirtsov, chief of staff, answered at the other end.

Spivak guessed by Sirtsov's voice, by the way he coughed several times before beginning to speak, that he had some bad news for him.

"What're you interested in, Pavel Grigorievich?" asked the chief of staff. "The position at Second Battalion? Fighting. Repulsed three attacks. Apparently trying to squeeze the ends of the horse-shoe but not succeeding. Could have expected it, of course. It was a tempting bit of 'Kursk arch.' No tanks, but tommy-gunners are pretty hot at it. Heavy gunfire too. They tried a converging movement on C.P. Connection cut off for a time. It's all right now. Rodionov's been killed, you know?"

Spivak recalled how Rodionov had said: "It's not by a bullet I'll be killed, Comrade Captain," and he asked:

"How'd it happen?"

"The blast threw him against the dugout wall. Not a single wound on his body, but his pulse doesn't work."

"Anything else?" asked Spivak.

There was a slight pause at the other end.

"Petrenko's wounded. Badly wounded. In his head and chest. Maznuk's taken over command. Kostromin's there too."

"Petrenko?"

Sirtsov, who was aware of the Captain's friendship with Petrenko, was doubtlessly surprised at the calm tone of the question. But Spivak had been painfully aware from the very beginning of the conversation of what was coming. He had expected worse.

His first impulse was to dash off to regimental C.P. and from there get through to the Second Battalion. Struck by a sudden thought, he picked up the receiver again.

"Is that you, Comrade Sirtsov? Where's Petrenko? What state's he in?"

"Just now, not more than five minutes ago, he was driven down in Goryunov's car to the medical station. The first-aid men brought him in here on a stretcher. When they bandaged his wounds he came to and asked for vodka. I gave him some, then he lost consciousness again. Through and through wound in the chest—in the lung. Bullet wound in the head too, but I don't think it's touched the brain."

Spivak handed the receiver back to the signalman. The medical station was twenty kilometres in the rear. With the day having begun so disturbingly he could not very well make that trip. Besides, it was doubtful whether they would keep Petrenko there long. If he pulled through they might meet again somewhere at the front, unless the war ended by that time, or he got killed himself. If his friend died, then he would never see him again. At the war the dead man's relatives are not summoned by telegram thousand mile distances to take a last farewell of the body.

Spivak left the stuffy dugout and went out into the fresh air, listening to the tumult of battle on his left at Height 304.5, and the song of the larks in the grey sky overhead. He sat down on the breastwork, drew his tobacco pouch out of his pocket and began rolling himself a cigarette with trembling fingers, spilling half the tobacco on the ground.

The words ran in his head all the time (he may have uttered them aloud for aught he knew): "Mikola, dash it, what the hell! Eh, Mikola! Mikola!..."

At seven o'clock in the morning, after the Germans had delivered their sixth unsuccessful attack against the height, the battle began to subside. The enemy had paid a heavy price for the sortie. Even from Third Battalion C.P. numerous bodies in green uniforms could be seen through field-glasses littering the slopes.

At eight o'clock Major Kostromin, who had returned from

the battalion, summoned Spivak to him to make up a report for divisional political department, though he had been an eye-witness of the engagement and could easily have described the details himself.

Spivak was kept so busy that he had no time to grieve over his comrade. Major Kostromin described the battle while Spivak wrote it down, hastening to complete the report before the dispatch-rider left for divisional headquarters. This is how he first learned of what had taken place at Second Battalion and how Petrenko had received two bullet wounds at his C.P. at the very beginning of the battle.

The Germans, as Spivak and Solovyov had guessed when watching the battle from Third Battalion C.P., had delivered an attack against the Fourth and Sixth companies with the object of cutting off the wedge formed in the defence line. The attackers were two battalions strong, including reinforcements. When the fighting started on the flanks, simultaneous firing broke out in the rear behind C.P. Evidently that evening, when things were so suspiciously quiet, a group of German Tommy-gunners had succeeded in crossing No Man's Land and infiltrating through our lines, coming out into the rear just when the battle started.

Kostromin arrived at the battalion when this invading party had been finished off. There were not more than fifteen of them, but they had raised the devil of a rumpus in the dark. The first to encounter them was the officer of the mess squad with the cooks and drivers who killed two of the raiders and scattered the rest, incidentally shooting down their own horses in the darkness and wounding one of our men. Next the Germans ran into our mortar batteries posted in a ravine, where the sentries, wakeful and alert, opened fire from their automatics and killed four more of them. Seven Tommy-gunners, however, managed to reach the C.P. where there were

the staff guard, runners, signalmen, Petrenko and the clerk. Rodionov was with the Fourth company, where he had gone earlier in the evening. It was there he was killed.

The men related that Petrenko's first words on hearing the rattle of the German automatics near C.P. were: "That's a nuisance! Rather out of season. This isn't 1941 to go and get bottled." He acted with his customary composure. Leaving a signalman at the telephone in the dugout, he ordered the others to arm themselves with grenades, of which he always had a caseful at headquarters, and to go out one by one. "Let's get outside and see what's going on." The men had heard him say aloud to Krapivka in a cool, level voice intended to allay any nervous excitement: "When will you learn to put things in their proper place, Krapivka? Where's that trophy pistol of mine you took a loan of the other day?" "I have it, Comrade Senior Lieutenant, here it is," answered Krapivka. "Oh, you have, have you? Don't you know the right place for it? Next time be good enough to clean it and put it where it belongs, under my pillow." He was wounded as soon as he got outside the dugout.

For a while the men heard the voice of Lieutenant Dobrovolsky, and then he too was hit. Senior Sergeant Krapivka took over command of the reserve squad and the runners. Phone connections with the companies were maintained all the time. Krapivka reported to Lieutenant Maznuk, C.O. of the nearest Fifth Company, that the Battalion Commander was hors de combat and that there was not a single officer at C.P., and asked him in a tone that was both a request and a command (he had said: "Will you please," that sounded very peremptory) to come to C.P. and take over command of the battalion. In the meantime he broke his men up into three groups and, drawing a circle round the tommy-gunners lodged in the trenches, set about mopping them up. They were on

their own ground here, and knew every inch of the trenches and approaches to the unfinished trenches they had themselves dug here in the daytime, whereas the Germans popped away at random, playing their old trumped card of trying to create a panic.

Lieutenant Maznuk did not stay to cavil at the imperious tone Sergeant Krapivka had used over the phone in the excitement of the moment, and appeared at C.P. just when Major Kostromin came to the rescue from the other side with a platoon from regimental C.O.'s reserves. They had encountered the battalion C.O. and Lieutenant Dobrovolsky as they were being carried out on makeshift stretchers of rifles and tent-capes. Petrenko had asked him too for a drink of vodka, and when Kostromin's flask proved to be empty, he asked them to telephone to regimental headquarters to have some ready when he was brought there. "A bad sign, when a badly wounded man asks for vodka first thing," Kostromin had commented.

When he and Maznuk met at C.P. everything had already quietened down. Krapivka was sharing trophy cigarette lighters, daggers and pocket torches with the men in the dugout and examining photographs and documents found on the dead Germans. The signalmen had repaired the wire cut by the Germans and were checking connections with the regiment. During the rest of the battle Maznuk took charge, aided by Kostromin, and though the Germans, supported by heavy mortar fire, were attacking tooth and nail, they failed to make a breakthrough or dislocate the companies. The situation was handled without recourse to divisional ordnance or reinforcements, not considering the platoon Kostromin had come up with. Nothing more of any importance took place in the course of the engagement, except for the usual casualties.

"Put down: casualties—nine killed, twenty-two wounded," Kostromin said to Spivak. "Mention that the German cas-

ualties were three times as heavy. That's a fact, no hoodwinking. If anybody doesn't believe it, let him go and count 'em. They're still lying out there. Write that regimental C.O. has recommended Sergeant Krapivka for government distinction for his able and courageous defence of headquarters. What a shame Petrenko's been hit, what beastly luck! Where the devil did they manage to get through? On somebody's end line, I suppose. Those end lines are a sore spot, I tell you. It reminds you of the bridge on the boundary line between two counties in the old days—there's nobody to repair it until the governor-general drops down on them from the clouds.... Who are we going to appoint instead of Rodionov?"

"I think we could appoint Fomin, Comrade Major," said Spivak. "One of my fellows in the Sixth Company, a Siberian, a fine agitator, Sergeant Fomin. Let's appoint him for the job. I think he could safely be promoted to Junior Lieutenant."

"Fomin? I know him. Squad leader? Will they let us have him on the political staff? Well, you finish off, and I'll go and see Major Goryunov."

After writing out his political report Spivak began preparing the promotion papers for Fomin. Then Kostromin gave him a pile of correspondence from divisional, army and corps political departments which needed sorting, filing and answering. At three in the afternoon Spivak remembered that he had not had anything to eat that day, and sent an orderly to mess squad for some porridge. His attention diverted for a moment from his work, he thought of Petrenko and a sense of utter loneliness gripped painfully at his heart....

Having had his meal and put all the papers away in a strong-box, he went to his dugout, where he had hardly lived these days, and tumbled in till evening. With the approach of dusk he had to visit the First Battalion, where he had not been for some time, to hold a conference with local

army tabloid editors and an instructional talk with primary agitators. . . .

War is war. Lieutenant Maznuk remained in lieu of Battalion Commander. Sergeant Fomin took Rodionov's place.

Spivak phoned Captain Kuzin, instructor of divisional political department, with whom he was on friendly terms, and asked him to visit Petrenko at the medical station. Kuzin answered him the same day that Petrenko was no longer there, having been removed deeper rearwards after his operation.

A newly-dug little mound—another common grave—made its appearance on the green slopes of a nameless hill, known as Height 304.5.

The men continued to hack away at the stony ground, girdling the earth in a tangled skein of trenches. Rockets lit up the sky at night, bombers shuttled back and forth, nightingales sang in the woods, and observers stood at their posts with eyes glued on the German heights, taking stealthy puffs at cigarettes concealed up their sleeves. Trucks kept on coming up with shells and fresh troops. . . .

A week later found Spivak in the rear zone of the army, within forty kilometres of the forward lines, attending a one-day seminary for regimental agitators. On learning that there was an army field hospital stationed in the village where the army political department was quartered, Spivak went there after the seminary to enquire whether they happened to have a patient by the name of Nikolai Ilyich Petrenko. He was overjoyed on hearing the answer:

"Yes, we have. In ward No. 7. Over in that cottage with the red tiles."

Petrenko lay on a low iron cot with his head to the window. Spivak did not immediately recognize him among the five other inmates of the room, as all of them had their heads

bandaged. Petrenko caught sight of him as soon as he appeared in the doorway and cried out joyfully with a feeble effort to raise himself.

"Pavlo Grigorievich! You here! That's wonderful! So you found me!"

The doctor had told Spivak that his friend's head wound was not serious and the perforating wound in the chest had not developed any complications. The state of his health gave no cause for anxiety.

Petrenko's first question when Spivak sat down by his bed was: "Well, did you hold the height?"

"Yes, drat it. You see where the snag was. Kostromin says it was the tail ends. You must have had a loophole there somewhere."

"Not anywhere in my lines. Must have been in Solovyov's. It's his fellows who are busy shepherding cows instead of keeping an eye out for the Germans. Well, what's the news? Christ, it's miserable lying here, Pavlo Grigorievich! They won't let you read—besides, they haven't anything new. The same stuff we've read twenty times in the Battalion. And they say I'll have to stay in bed three months. I've asked 'em not to send me further back, away from this outfit, otherwise I may never get back to it. Who's in charge of the battalion now? Maznuk? And who's commanding his company? How'd you get here? Did you know I was here—did you come specially or were you visiting army P.D.?"

The nurses had warned Spivak that Senior Lieutenant was not allowed to speak too much or to become excited. Spivak answered all his queries, including that about the battalion's casualties, suppressing, however, some of the names which he thought might upset him. At length he said:

"Well, that'll do. You take it easy, Mikola, (as if he had any option) and I'll drop in again a little later."

On coming out of the cottage Spivak took a look round, and choosing a cool spot under the shade of a tall poplar in the courtyard, he spread his tent-cape on the ground, sat down on it, and drawing out his jottings and a clean notebook, copied out the letter for three hours in succession. When he had finished Spivak put the letter in an envelope and went back to the ward.

"Here's the letter to Semyon Karpovich, Mikola," he said, holding up the packet. "Turned out pretty big. Filled a whole notebook. Time we sent it off. What's the use of our having talked the whole thing over unless we let them know it. Here's an envelope for it—though I guess it could go without it if we rolled it up and mailed it by book-post."

"Is it all there?"

"Yes. I only put in a postscript that you're in hospital just now, collected some lead, but have been patched up already."

Petrenko turned over the pages and signed the letter without reading it.

"Well, that's that," said Spivak, rolling up the notebook and pasting down the cover with some masticated bread. "I'll post it right away. Never know what might happen to us fellows."

He wrote Petrenko's wife a postcard at his request and another to his own wife, and carried them all off to the field post office which happened to be in the same village.

On the way back Spivak bought a jug of fresh aromatic honey from one of the village women, a jar of clotted cream and a little basket of early spring berries which he placed on Petrenko's bedside table under a newspaper together with some tobacco shaken out of his pouch while the nurse was not looking. Spivak sat on chatting with his friend for another

half an hour. The sun was setting. It was time for him to return to his regiment.

Writing down the address of the hospital Spivak took leave of his friend, promising to pay him another visit at the first opportunity. He walked out of the village onto the highroad where truck after truck flashed past him loaded high with shells, bombs, cases of tobacco, macaroni and tinned food, and sacks of grain and flour.

When a man is in a cheerful frame of mind fortune generally smiles on him. The first car that caught up with him came to a stop with jarring brakes. The driver nodded to him.

"I'll give you a lift, Captain! Where are you going?"

"A little farmstead back of Yartsevo, about three kilometres left of it."

"Get in, I'm going that way."

Spivak vaulted himself into the truck. The driver stepped on the gas and the car raced on once more along the broad smooth surface of the front-zone road.

Sitting on ammunition cases in the spacious American truck was a team of soldiers in new shirts and caps, with brand new tommy-guns. But they were obviously not new recruits. One of them, Spivak noticed, had a Stalingrad medal, two others wore "For Defence of Odessa" medals and another had an Order of the Red Banner.

The trucks following behind were all of the same type, and they too contained soldiers in new equipment, armed with tommy-guns, anti-tank rifles and mortars. Apparently some repaired and rested up outfit was being moved into action.

It is not the custom among military men to enquire of strangers, be they privates or officers, concerning the redisclocation of military units, but Spivak was unable to restrain himself.

"Another take-off, boys?" he enquired of the men. "Coming to lend a hand? Good for you. . . . This time it's going to be a big jump—the last lap."

"We've had a pretty long lap as it is, Comrade Captain," said one of the men. "Been thirteen days on the road, all the way from—."

A sergeant with a grizzled moustache, wearing an Order of the Red Banner, obviously C.O. of the outfit, looked at the soldier sternly.

"Nobody's asking you where you're coming from or where you're going to. The Captain only asked about us coming to lend a hand. Sure, that we are. Do we look like a delegation come to check up on harvesting preparations on a collective farm?"

Spivak nodded approval.

"Quite right. Where you're coming from is not important. What's important is a good strong take-off."

The word "take-off" sank into his mind like a line of poetry, a refrain. He had a smoke with the men, admiring their tanned faces—these were fine reinforcements, hardened fellows. From the way they looked and spoke, the calm, unhurried turn of the head as they scanned the unfamiliar landscape of the new front, one could tell at a glance that these were hard-boiled shock-proof veterans. Spivak was interested to know whether there were any men among them from his hometown, and while he questioned them on this score the word "take-off" kept on revolving in his head. . . .

The Articles of War, those dry codes of age-old military and worldly wisdom, contain some fine passages. There is, for instance, the admonition to soldiers that, when coming under heavy enemy mortar-fire, they should not waver. He who wavers is lost. Hugging the ground will not help you. Take off,

charge on! If the enemy artillery has bracketed you—take off, come to grips!

“Take off!” Spivak said to himself aloud, but nobody heard these words, which were drowned in the noise of the motor and the rushing wind. “Splendid!”

And he was sorry that he had not mentioned these words in his letter to Semyon Karpovich: “If you want to live—take off!”

THE END

